

When I was serving a church in Indianapolis, I had a colleague who was a bit more adventurous than I am and consequently would often take the scenic route for about any drive that he could. Where I would drive straight from Indianapolis to Chicago, Mark would instead wander around through the countryside, taking it all in. (I've never quite understood why he wanted to take in northern Indiana. Southern Indiana is beautiful but northern? It's just flat. There are lots of cornfields. In the winter, it's acres upon acres of corn stubble. With all love and respect to the Hoosiers I know, corn stubble is just not attractive.) Anyhow, in one of his meandering drives he happened on a sight that intrigued and attracted him. He and his wife saw in the distance a pretty ramshackle building that was obviously a church. (Which I suppose is the advantage of living in a flat state- you see things a long way off.) Mark was intrigued so they drove a little closer. As they approached the building they saw the church had one of those signs out front that can be changed to read different things. This particular church had used their moveable letters to announce the name of the church and Mark said that was what caught his attention. Outside this rundown little building was a marquee that read, "The Church of New Beginnings."

It was the name that intrigued him. He started wondering what a church that really offered new beginnings looked like.

But that's exactly what we claim each week, that we can begin again.

Take for example this couple of fellows who thought they had it all figured out. They had found this preacher, you see. And man, could he preach. He knew just how to combine the right gestures and body language with a compelling message. He could

bring just enough heat to the sermon to convince you that it was time to repent. And then, when you repented, he'd take you right out in the river and dunk you on the spot. He had the charisma to know that there is a moment to strike the chord, and he'd nail it every time. He could work up just the right amount of moral indignation to make you jump in alongside him by pointing out the obvious- calling attention to the failings of the government or the church to meet the needs of the people. Let me tell you, he could preach - and not in a high-minded fussy way. So these fellows just warmed right up to him and they became friends. They were standing around, shooting the breeze one day, when out of the blue, their preacher *lost his mind*. At least that's what it seemed like. He said, "Look, here is the Lamb of God." And when he said it, he pointed to this other man, one they'd seen walking around, just like any other guy, and their preacher said, "Here is the lamb of God."

So these two fellows started to follow the other preacher. I guess they stayed back a bit, but it's kind of hard to hide the fact that you're following someone so he turned around to them and said, "What are you looking for?"

Well, you know how it is when someone takes you by surprise. You just say anything...you don't really answer the question that is asked, you try to find a way to save face- you know, like those times when you're staring at someone while trying not to stare at them so that you can figure out how you know them, and then right about the time that you figure out that you've never met them in your life, they notice you've been staring? Well, this preacher turns around to these two fellows who've been following him and says, "what are you looking for?"

So they answered him, "Where are you staying?"

And he says back to them, “Come on and see.”

Well, so far, the whole thing looks like a comedy of errors, but now it gets really interesting. The two fellows, Andy and John follow this other preacher back to his motel, and they hung out until about four o’clock. Then Andy remembered he was supposed to pick up his brother from work, so he had to get on over to the QuikTrip.

So Andy found his brother Simon, and he said, “You are not going to believe this guy. John says he’s the lamb of God. I just spent the afternoon with him, and you’ve got to meet him. He’s the messiah.”

So Simon gives Andy the benefit of a doubt and they hop in the pickup truck and head back on over to Cheshire Motor Inn and Simon walks in and Jesus looks up at him and says, “I’m going to call you Rocky.” Then the next day Jesus decided he would go to his cousin’s wedding in the next county and they went with him.

Does that strike you as just a bit odd? You meet someone and the next day you quit your job and follow him? I may as well own it, that strikes me odd. When I think about the way Andrew and Simon Peter came to follow Jesus and fast-forward it; it strikes me as odd. I can’t say for certain that I have the kind of faith that it would take to do that. But that is what happened. Through a series of what must surely have looked like chance encounters, Simon and Andrew end up following Jesus. Only, he’s not Simon anymore, Jesus has given him a new name. And in the Bible, the giving of a new name means a new beginning. Something has changed. Now he’s Peter, and his whole world has changed.

Peter was changed by his encounter with the lamb of God.

Years ago, another colleague of mine was interviewing with various PNCs around the country and he ended up in conversation with a church up in New Jersey. It too is a rather unremarkable building. So my friend went there to interview and there was one aspect of the sanctuary that he found intriguing. In the pew racks, where we have Bibles and Hymnals, he found both of those things, but in every rack there was also a box of Kleenex. It struck him as a bit odd, but he didn't say anything about it until later on. When they had finished their interview and just about said everything they had to say, he asked the question. "So why are there boxes of Kleenex in all the pew racks?"

"The Kleenex are there," said the chair of the committee, "because we believe people come here expecting to be moved and changed. A few years ago, we were floundering a bit, we didn't know exactly what our identity was. So we did a study of what was important to the members of the congregation that are here, and what the demographics of the neighborhood suggest is important to our neighbors, and they weren't the same, and so we drew the conclusion that the only way we could revitalize our congregation was to throw our doors wide open and invite the whole neighborhood in. Well, we thought what would happen was that we would assimilate all these folks and make them part of 'our church'. Our nearest neighbor is a rehab clinic, so we knew we'd have recovering addicts if they came to church. We didn't have any LGBT members, but our neighborhood has lots of LGBT living here. We figured we'd just grit our teeth and bear it and eventually we would brainwash them sufficiently that they would think like us. Then the opposite happened. We started to see things through their eyes- through the eyes of an addict, through the eyes of someone pushed out of their own family or pushed to the margin of society. And then we were the ones who were crying in worship."

Peter was changed about his encounter with the lamb of God, but what about us?

The Bible says a lot about change in our hearts. Ours is a faith based on change- personal change and personal growth. We are not static. God expects our faith to engage our living. If we come to church on Sunday morning and leave and go back into our business or our school or our homes and you can't tell any difference between us and the rest of the secular world then I would argue, not much has happened. Maybe we felt good on Sunday, a little holy, and we got our church fix, but if we don't live any differently than the folks who haven't had their names changed, then we might even be wasting our time and God's as well.

Because we too have had our name changed. Just as Simon became Peter, the Rock upon which the church would be built, we too are not as we were. We are now called Christians. When we baptize a child, by the way, that is the question we ask, "What is the Christian name of your child?" We ask because we're calling them by name and saying there's a change. There is a before and an after. The babies can't tell but the adults we baptize know there's a difference. So we're clear, before we are baptized, or have our children baptized, we are not outside of God's grace- we never are, not for a moment in our lives does God abandon us or ignore us, but in Baptism, we claim for ourselves or our children those promises God has already made. So, if we come to church but we don't integrate Christianity into how we live as people in the world- if we don't reflect the change that has happened to us, then we need to get to work on it and start trying to show God's hand upon us. Because that change is important. We are a place of new beginnings...again and again and again.

I'm quite sure we don't always feel very Christian. I don't sometimes. If you don't feel like a Christian, don't worry about that, C.S. Lewis says. His advice is good sound advice. If you don't feel like a Christian, then just act like one. If you see someone coming and your feelings are not Christian, not charitable and kind, don't worry about that. *Act* as though your feelings are charitable and kind. And keep on acting charitably and kindly, and he said, you will come to the point when it is not an act. There is truth to his words, but we have to do it earnestly and deliberately and constantly. We have to work at acting like Christians- not just here in the church, but elsewhere as well. It's good advice and it will bear fruit, but that is only half of the good news that our lesson today shares.

There is another side to a new beginning, and that is that God never gives up on any of us. There is nothing that lies outside the scope of God's grace. Do you remember the baptism scene in "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" In it, as Everett, Pete and Delmar are making their way on their Odyssey, Everett and Delmar in a fit of religious frenzy get themselves baptized, and when they come up out of the river, Pete and Delmar declare to Everett the preacher told them, "Their sin's done been washed away!" And as naïve and simplistic and simple as it seems, it's the truth!

Our new beginning is truly a new beginning. And that may not sound like great good news to all of us, but I can tell you right now that I know some folks for whom that is good news like the water of life. Because there are sometimes when there is no fixing what has happened, and nothing short of a new beginning is going to change the situation. And the good news of the Gospel is that we can have that new beginning.

Fred Craddock captures it so well, he writes: “When I was pastoring in Tennessee there was a girl about seven years old who came to our church regularly, to Sunday School and sometimes her parents let her stay for the worship service. They didn’t come. We had a circular drive at that church. It was built for people who let their children off and drove on. We didn’t want to inconvenience them, so we had a circular drive. But they were very faithful, Mom and Dad. They had moved here from New Jersey with the chemical plant. He was upwardly mobile, they were both very ambitious, and they didn’t come to church. There wasn’t really any need for that, I guess. But on Saturday nights, the whole town knew of their parties. They gave parties, not for entertainment, but as part of the upwardly mobile thing. That determined who was invited- the right people, the one just above, finally on up to the boss. And those parties were full of drinking and wild and vulgar things. Everybody knew. But there was a beautiful girl every Sunday.

One Sunday morning, I looked out and she was there, and I thought, ‘well, she’s with her friends,’ but there were Mom and Dad. And after the sermon, at the close of the service, as is the custom at my church, came an invitation to discipleship. And Mr. and Mrs. Mom and Dad come down to the front. They confessed faith in Christ. Afterward, I said, ‘What prompted this?’ And they said, ‘Well, do you know about our parties?’ And I said, ‘yeah, I heard about your parties.’ They said, ‘well, we had one last night again, and it got a little loud and it got a little rough. And there was too much drinking. And we waked our daughter, and she came downstairs, she was on the third step. And she saw that we were eating and drinking and she said, ‘Oh, can I give the blessing? God is great; God is good, let us thank him for our food. Good night everybody.’ She went back upstairs. ‘Oh My land, it’s time to go, we gotta be going. We’ve stayed...’ Within

two minutes the room was empty.’ Mr. and Mrs. Mom and Dad are picking up crumpled napkins and wasted and spilled peanuts and half-sandwiches and taking empty glasses on trays to the kitchen. And with two trays he and she meet beside the sink on either side, and they look at each other, and he expresses what both are thinking, ‘where do we think we’re going.’ The moment of truth.”

In the moment of truth, there can be a new beginning. Because that’s what we’re here for, a new name, a new beginning. We’re here to follow an itinerant preacher who wandered through town and changed the world. But half measures won’t do.

We can’t say, “Oh, there’s a new beginning for you, but not you.” We can’t say, “There’s grace enough for this person, but not that person.” We can’t say, “I’ll be a Christian on Sundays, but leave my business out of this.” We can’t say, “I’ll be a Christian unless it’s unpopular or unless it’s not fiscally sound,” because that’s not following Christ. It’s an “all in” sort of thing. Peter and Andrew got up and walked away and followed Christ. They took a new beginning, and so can you. Because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we can all take a new beginning.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.