

Reflections on Baptism, Identity and Spiritual Renewal Leave

A Letter from Pastor Steve's Father

About a month ago, I sent my dad a copy of my Lilly Grant Proposal for Clergy Renewal leave. The proposal outlines the activities planned for the church and for me during the leave June 18 – October 8. The theme is baptismal renewal, Sabbath, and identity. My dad, Pete Costello, a certified evangelist and a licensed local pastor in the Virginia Conference of the UMC, sent me the following letter after he read my proposal. His reflections are worth pondering. – Pastor Steve

Dear Steven,

I read all of the application you sent in. It was amazing the work you had to do. They did want answers to a lot of questions.

You did express some about reflecting on your baptism. We both know that baptism does not give you your true identity because you can't get what you already have. God gave that to you from the get go but the hope is that God will use baptism to give a person the experience of their true identity.

This is how I see this hope being played out. You already have in you your true identity. This true identity is the image of God and for a Christian it means you have the characteristics of Jesus so the hope is that when you can recall and identify the attributes of Jesus they will be used by God to give you the experience of your true identity. For example, when you experience the water being poured over you, you should try to see Jesus in the river Jordan with water being poured over him by John. Another attribute of Jesus that is in you is God's kingdom so you should take notice of the body of believers reaching out their arms and hands toward you as you are being baptized because this is a sign of God's kingdom, it is power to hopefully be used by God to stir up the feeling of God's kingdom in you. If and when this happens you are experiencing your true identity. Life just doesn't get any better than this.

This brings me to suggest something that I am sure you have already thought of and that is to write down in a journal where you have seen the characteristics of Jesus in your travels. They can be in nature, in people, in your readings, in relationships, in your marriage and in your memories and thoughts. When you get back to Faith Church, share with the church folks what you wrote in your journal and explain why and especially the feeling you got. Was it joy? Was it freedom? Was it wonder and awe? Was it love? Or, was it nothing special? You will want to share why you think it was that way. The answer can be, "I simply don't know." The hope you have for doing this is that God will use what you wrote to give some of the members the experience of their true identity. We both know the larger percent of members experiencing their true identity the greater the power there will be in the church. The good news is it will be God's power. This is important and crucial to remember.

With love,

Dad