

Baptism and Righteousness

Matthew 3:13-17

Today we not only remember our Lord's baptism, but we also prepare for next week when our friend Jane Zhao and young Marcus, the son of Ed and Liis, will be baptized by Bishop Bob, now known as, Bishop Grandpa Bob!

So today is a perfect day to sit for a bit and ask just what is baptism, why do we do it, what does it mean, and more to the point today, what is the relationship between baptism and righteousness?

"Righteousness" is one of those words that's always popping up in Scripture, and while we are plenty familiar with its ugly twin named "self-righteous," the word "righteous" can leave many folks scratching their heads.

Isaiah speaks of righteousness this morning.

And in Matthew's gospel, as Jesus speaks for the first time..... we eavesdrop on the only conversation we know of between Jesus and John the Baptist.

It goes like this:

"John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?'

Jesus answers him, 'Let it be so for now; it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'"

So what's going on here, and what's the connection between baptism and righteousness?

Now before you start to doze off because it seems like some heavy theological mumbo jumbo is coming your way early on a Sunday morning, take a good look at what's happening in today's gospel.... because in this encounter between John and Jesus we are offered a doorway into the mystery that is "righteousness."

What's really going on this morning in the middle of the Jordan River?

There's Jesus, kneeling before John, asking John for baptism.

But look deeper...

And when you do, what you see happening this morning in the Jordan is that God, through Jesus, is kneeling before man....God, through Jesus, is submitting to humanity.

It's a clue, a very important clue, that in Jesus, God is about to do something brand new!

Jesus submits to the baptism of John.

And what does this baptism look like?

It is the baptism of wrath and judgment.

Jesus submits to and receives the baptism of "the axe being laid at the root of the tree."

This is the baptism John offers. i

It assumes an angry God, intent on vengeance,, not because God is like that, but because we are.

Violence and revenge and anger, these are our ways of dealing with sin....

And Jesus bears the full weight of this baptism.

Betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, tried and convicted, then crucified by the best and brightest of the day....

This morning, God submits to humanity ... so that humanity can at long last submit to God...

God submits to us so that we can at long last see that our best thinking leads us only into violence and revenge and ill will toward one another; that our insistence at controlling people, places and things -- is a dead end.....

God submits to us so that we can at long last submit to God, and discover in that submission, God's way is indeed a refining fire, but not by condemnation or guilt or rejection; but God's refining fire burns with compassion, it engulfs with forgiveness, it consumes with mercy.

Which brings us, finally, to the very meaning of righteousness.

To be righteous is to be in right relation with God; meaning **we** submit to **God**.

Now, I'll grant you, this is something that has been twisted and distorted over so many years that the mere thought of submitting to God sends many folks running for the exits.

Too often submission is used by the powerful to control the weak, it is misused by husbands over wives, employers over employees, dominant races and classes over minorities.

But that's submission as we practice it, and it couldn't be more different than the submission into which God invites us.

The submission into which God invites us turns everything we thought we knew about God completely upside down.

We thought of God as a God of judgment — yet there is God, hanging from the cross, dying for us.

We thought of God as the one who separates good from bad, the saved from the damned — but there is God, searching out and finding lost coins, lost sheep, lost daughters and sons.

It seems that God is determined to gather every last one of us because we are all her children.

This righteousness that Jesus speaks of to John, it lies at the heart of every baptized person.

Because baptism is the entry point, into the strange world of the righteousness of God.

It's a world in which hate is met with forgiveness, where revenge is transformed into compassion, where looking out for me is released, so that I may look out for you.

We often think that the work of the Christian is done here in church, on Sundays.

It is not.

We come together on Sundays for strength and nourishment and insight so that we may then carry out our true work in the only place it can be carried out, in the everyday, workaday world.

You bear the image of God.

So does every human being.

Being baptized calls us to witness to that fact --- particularly to those who have no idea that they indeed bear the image of God.

This is your calling as a baptized person, this is your task.... and we are faithful to this task whether we are forgiving cousin Ernie for being obnoxious at the Thanksgiving table, or when we are organizing the poor for a march to the federal building.

We are faithful to this task when we give our spouse the benefit of the doubt and when we lobby the legislature for money for housing.

We are faithful to this task whether we're in suits and ties in the office from nine till five or whether we're in shorts and slippers on the streets, hustling for our daily bread.

We live this upside down gospel in our everyday lives because we live in a world desperate for the good news it brings — that real power is found in weakness, that real success is discovered in daily service to those in need, that true fame is found in quiet acts of kindness, in anonymous giving, in random acts of mercy.

Who ever imagined that the truth of our situation is this:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.” Mt 5:1-10

This is the life we are called to live.

It’s why we gather each and every week, because the counter message is loud, insistent and brash.

Our consumer society says:

Blessed are the rich, because cash is king.

Blessed are the young, they are to be envied and idolized.

Blessed are the politically connected, their nest shall be well feathered.

But we are here to remember that we’ve cast our lot with a different message – and a different messenger – one who helps us say “yes” to the God who kneels before humanity, so that humanity can at long last kneel before God.

Perhaps we baptize so that we can finally see that God isn’t the uptight mother in-law coming to see if we chipped the fine china she gave us long ago, but that God is like that hilarious uncle, with wild hair and a twinkle in his eye, and a bottle of scotch stuck under his arm.... and we wait for him, we look for him, we long for him, because, being with him, well, it’s fun, it’s peace, its home. Capon, Parables of Judgment, paraphrased.

+amen

