

“To Fulfill All Righteousness”
Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
January 9, 2011
Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1-9

²Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ²He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Sermon

Our Scripture text for today invites us to attend a baptism.

Now, I don't think I have to tell this group

how important baptism is.

In the Gospel of Matthew,

the Gospel we will be reading this year,

the story begins with baptism...

with John baptizing in the Jordan River...

and it ends with baptism... with Jesus' final words:

“Go into all the world and make disciples,

baptizing them in the name

of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...”¹

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Attending a Baptism* in *The Cherry Log Sermons* (WJK-2001), p 7.

I don't need to tell you how important baptism is,
yet over the more than twenty-five years of being a pastor
I've become keenly aware
just how misunderstood baptism is among Presbyterians.
For example, every once in awhile
someone will call and request a private baptism.
They want to do it in their home or garden
or if they want it at the church,
they just want to invite close family and friends.
Well, I have to tell them that we don't do private baptisms
in the Presbyterian Church.
And the reason is straightforward...
we believe that one of the primary meanings of baptism
is entry into the Christian church.
While we stay members of our family of origin,
through baptism we are welcomed
into the larger family of Christ.
Therefore, the presence of the church...
the presence of that larger family is absolutely essential.

Another misunderstanding –
this one has only happened a couple of times,
but someone will ask me to re-baptize them.
“I was baptized as an infant,” one person said,
“but I don't remember it and would like to do it again
when it can be more meaningful to me.”
Or another: “I was baptized as a teenager,
but it was all about peer pressure.
I have grown so much in my faith since then
that it would mean so much more now.”

Having grown up Southern Baptist,
I certainly understand the sentiment here.
But again, I have to tell them that Presbyterians don't re-baptize.
It's not because we're rigid or insensitive...
it's because we believe that to do so would miss the point
that baptism is about what God has done for us.
Baptism is baptism NOT because we feel extra close to God...
NOT because we finally get to the place
where we fully understand what it means.
It is baptism because of who God is and what God does.
God takes the initiative to love us and forgive us...
to reach out to claim us as God's own.
And for that, one baptism is sufficient
because God's grace for us is always sufficient.

Yet, by far THE MOST FREQUENT misunderstanding is revealed
in the most frequent request.
It is the request of “inactive” church members
to have me baptize their child or their grandchild.
“Pastor, I know you haven’t seen a lot of us lately,
but the whole family is coming to town for the holidays.
I wonder if you might baptize little Johnny that Sunday?”

Many of you know the reason this is such a strange request –
it’s because baptism signifies a covenant,
and a covenant requires two parties.
In baptism a church takes on covenant responsibility
for the spiritual nurture of the child..
the community promises to love the child,
to teach the child,
to model for that child what faithful Christian living looks like.
How could we in good conscience do that
when we know that the child’s parents
have no intention of making that even possible?

Over the years I have encountered
many misunderstandings about baptism,
but there is ONE THING that has never, ever happened –
In all my experience no parent has ever said to me:
“I refuse to have my child baptized because
you church folk expect WAY TOO MUCH of your members.”
The sad truth of the matter is that all too often
the church expects far too little from their baptized;
something Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ baptism helps makes clear.

Here’s what I mean.
All four Gospels have an account of Jesus’ baptism,
but only Matthew tells us about
this interesting little conversation between John and Jesus.
Jesus has come to the Jordan where John is baptizing
and presents himself to John.
Understanding that his place is secondary to Jesus, John resists,
saying: “I need to be baptized by you,
and do you come to me?”
But Jesus answers him,
“Let it be so for now,
for it is proper for us in this way
for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

Now, these are extremely important words for Matthew’s Gospel
because they are the first words Jesus speaks.

As Matthew begins this unfolding of the gospel story,
the very first out of Jesus' mouth are about **"righteousness."**
It means doing what God requires...
it means being about God's business...
it means being obedient.

Yet, this word that plays such a key role in Jesus' baptism
is often overlooked in our baptism ritual.
We don't much emphasize obedience.

Perhaps it's because most of our baptisms are of infants
and it is right to recognize God's initiative...
it is fitting to celebrate God's grace
in calling this child into Christ's church.
Yet, there is another very important part of our liturgy
which comes when the child's parents
affirm their intent to live the Christian faith in their homes...
it comes when all the other adults in the room
promise to the best of our ability to show this child
what a living, breathing Christian looks like.

Let's see that for what it is - a vow of obedience.
In baptism something wonderful is given to us.
Yet, at the same time something huge is expected of us...
and when Jesus steps down into the waters of the Jordan,
he is in a dramatic way summarizing the path he will take.
He will submit to God.
He will obey.
He will fulfill all righteousness.

A lot has been written recently
about the "success" of what are called
"high-expectation churches."
These are churches that make no bones
about what they expect of their members.
Whether a person comes for baptism or through a new members class,
the expectations are clearly laid out:
- regular worship attendance,
- some kind of personal devotional practice,
- being active in a small group,
- having a job in the church or some sort of mission outside,
- tithing 10% of their income.

Recently I read of a survey of several hundred 18-22 year olds...
the very young people who sit with us in these pews.
Well, these 18-22 year olds had at least two things in common.

One, they had remained active in church
at a time when many kids drop out.
And two, they continued to be active in church after that.
Though these young people
came from different places and denominations,
they all reported that their churches
were not simply going through the motions,
but were making a difference in the world...
AND their churches had high expectations of them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's well-known words speak this reality:

“When Christ calls a man/woman,
he calls them to come and die.”

And what we learn today,
when Jesus steps down into the waters of the Jordan,
is that this is what he is beginning to do –
he is beginning to die to himself so that he might obey God...
he is laying aside HIS business
so he can be about God's business.

Martin Luther said, “Remember your baptism.”

How can people do that?

In Luther's church, like ours,
most of the baptisms were of infants.

Children were brought in by their mothers and fathers.

How could they possibly remember their baptisms?

In Luther's church, like ours,
when these kids were 12 or 13
they would be confirmed in the church.

“Yes,” they would say, “I accept my baptism...
I claim my baptism.”

Still, Luther said, “Remember your baptism.”

How could they do that?
He seemed to be asking the impossible.

But what Luther had in mind was this:

Remember your baptism by claiming yourself as God's child

and then, by going about God's business.²

Remember your baptism
by joining with John and Jesus
as they seek to fulfill all righteousness.

² Craddock, p.9