

The Rev. Erin Hensley

January 8, 2017

The 1st Sunday after the Epiphany: Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, Matthew 3:13-17

### On What is Proper for Us, On Learning to Yield

All four Gospels-Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John-have an account of the baptism of Jesus. In all accounts, Jesus' baptism occurs at the beginning of his public ministry. This conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ is unique to Matthew's gospel and the focus for today's sermon.

We must remember that John and Jesus are both faithful Jews; they know their Hebrew scriptures by heart. Jesus is probably 29 years old, which is not a young adult for first century Palestine days. Given Jesus' mother Mary and her family relations with John's mother Elizabeth, John and Jesus have a bit of history. They know that the Jordan River is just any river; this is where with the help of Moses and then Joshua, God's people entered the promised land of Canaan. Everyone's drawn out into the water to see this prophet John and to be cleansed from sin through baptism. Jesus, the Greek version of the name Joshua, comes from Galilee to John at the Jordan River. Jesus, the new Joshua, enters the Jordan to lead the world to the promised land, the kingdom, the very dominion of God in full, in flesh, in all.

John knew he was preparing the way and now the way is here; Jesus walks into the Jordan River to stand with John. The old age and the new age standing eye-to-eye greeting one another in the magic, murky water. John knows and says, "I need to be baptized by you Jesus. And you come to be baptized by me? It's not right." But Jesus knows this must be "Let it be so now; permit this, allow this, yield to this request. It is fitting for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness. The grace that led Jesus to John leads John to say, "Yes, Lord. I yield my time. I yield how I thought things would be. I'll be here with you in the water. I'll do what you ask of me. Right here. Right now."

Jesus didn't need to be baptized because he was in every way like us except for sin, that seeking of our ego's will instead of God's will. To fulfill all righteousness, to be the suffering, gentle servant with those in no man's land, he had to be baptized like everyone else. After all, the Kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus is one of consent, not coercion, power with and not power over others. And John the Baptist, he had to yield. He consented, he allowed himself to do something that seemed absurd, inappropriate, beyond his understanding.

Sometimes I am good at yielding on the road, especially when there is no merging lane on I-35. Other moments I am horrible at yielding. If I want to impress someone or am worried about getting Rome built in a day, I don't yield. I plow. I don't ask for help. I don't listen very well. I want to get things right sometimes at the expense of right relationship. Things need to get done, right, and there's a way in which things are supposed to happen. Certainly the anointed one, the Son of God, isn't supposed to be baptized by a poor prophet out in the middle of nowhere? Certainly God could just say,

“John your baptism is out of business; let me go ahead and start baptizing with the spirit and fire right here and right now.”

But Jesus did not and does not do ministry solo. Jesus from the beginning of his ministry has wanted to be with those for whom he came. God loves humanity so much that God wants to be in the water with them as they find their way to the Promised Land. This baptism of Jesus is not a protest but as one scholar says “an act of solidarity with those to whom and for whom he has come. The one who is now being baptized by human hands, amid a call to repentance, is also the one who will usher in God’s kingdom and bring the same good news of forgiveness to those same human hands.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus’ baptism was the ordination to his ministry, his ministry of being Emmanuel, God with us.

At the 11:15 service today, a child will be baptized; this will be his ordination to ministry, just like it was for you and for Jesus. We will renew our own baptismal covenant this morning. We will be reminded that in the waters of baptism we are united with Jesus in his death and resurrection and in a way we are united with John, too, bearing witness to Christ wherever we may be, to do what he asks us to do for the sake of what’s right, for the sake of God’s restorative justice. John the Baptist baptized this was the gift to carry on Christ’s work.

You may think that you don’t have gifts. Or you may be wondering how you can exchange some of the gifts you received. Gifts are simply skills that give you joy; we all have skills and no one has them all. Jesus didn’t want to baptize himself; we wanted John the Baptist to share his gift, to bear witness to the Jesus before him. We are called to do the same. The feast of the Baptism of our Lord reminds us that all the baptized are called to ministry “to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.”

God does not need us to be ministers. God wants us. God wants us to bear witness to his work in the world because this is the right thing; this is our thing together. God will not twist our arm or force us, he will say, “Beloved, your skill matters, your presence matters. For now, just yield. Slow down. Be here with me in the waters of life and death and everything in between. Carry on with your work, with my work through and with you. It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Troy A Miller. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Volume I* page 239.