

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Matthew 3:13-17

Repent! Repent! You'd better be baptized or else! You know about the coming wrath of the Lord! Don't tell me that you are doing just fine! All of you need to repent! Well, that was my best shot at being a hell, fire and brimstone preacher! The reason I highlight this today is our Bible story. As we hear about the baptism of Jesus, we also hear about his cousin John the Baptist and how he invited people to repent and go back to true worship of God. Scholars struggle with this story as they try to explain that Jesus was not sinful and that he didn't really need to be baptized. There are all of kinds of explanations out there about that. One such explanation is that Jesus went through baptism just because he was so humble and wanted to be like us. Or he had to be baptized to be a role model for us. Another interesting explanation is that he had to do it as an act of obedience to God. But is that the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

I think the key in this text is the phrase to "fulfill all righteousness." Jesus submits not because of any need to repent of sin but rather to "fulfill all righteousness." The word "righteousness" carries different meanings. For many Christians, the word evokes thoughts of personal piety and the state of one's "soul" or "conscience" before God. Yet the Christian tradition has emphasized the personal aspect of righteousness to the exclusion of another important feature. In Greek and Hebrew, righteousness also signifies *God's saving action in the world*. One might even translate the Greek word for righteousness (*dikaion*) as "justice." According to Thomas Long, righteousness shows God's passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong. Thus Jesus' submission to John's baptism is no simple act of personal piety. On the contrary, Jesus discerns that John's baptism and fiery preaching constitute a revolutionary declaration about a new world order where God will set right all that the establishment (in Jerusalem and Rome) has corrupted.

Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, to fulfill God's justice in the world. This is what we are called to do in our baptism. Baptism is about claiming our vocation, who we are before God, who we are in the realm of justice seeking. This is the mystery of our baptism. In his baptism, Jesus declares the purpose of his life, to join God's mission of justice in the world. Baptism is about claiming our identity and committing to discovering who we are as children of God. In baptism we begin the journey of discovering and living our vocation in life.

One of the hardest questions in life is: Why am I here? What is my special purpose in life? This is hard to answer because we live in a world where there are expectations of us. We need to make money and be successful. We need to have meaningful relationships. We have to have our act together in life and that takes a lot of energy. The general statement of "we are all here to give and receive love" covers the big picture, but our work in life is to discover our unique ways of doing that. In baptism we are claimed by name, because each of one of us is unique and special to God in our way. As we journey with God in life, if we are able to pay attention, we can see our vocation. By vocation, I don't mean a job or a social status because these are only parts of the big picture of who we are. Occupations are incidental to our calling.

A young woman was joining a church and the pastor asked her, "What do you do for a living?" And with a sly smile, she looked at him and said, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ secretly disguised as a legal secretary." Isn't that wonderful? I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ carefully disguised as a carpool mom. As a financial advisor. As a bank teller. Or even as a McDonald's hamburgerologist. Knowing our deeper calling in life can make a great difference in how we go about our daily life.

Mother Teresa was once asked by a reporter, "What is your biggest problem?" Mother Teresa answered with one word: "Professionalism." She said, "Here are these servants of Jesus who care for the poorest of the poor. I have one who just went off and came back with her medical degree. Others have come back with registered nurse degrees. Another with a master's in social work, and when they come back with their degrees, their first question always is, "Where is my office?" Then she said, "But you know what I do? I send them over to the House of the Dying where they simply hold the hands of dying people for six months, and after that, they're ready to be servants again."

Our challenge is to find out how we are called to serve in this world. We often get consumed by our own needs and dreams that we sometimes never even learn how to discover how we are called to serve. Sometimes we think of vocation and calling as limited to those in professional ministry, the pastor, the missionaries, and those who work for the church. Yet, these people only make up 1% of the followers of Christ.

The rest of the people are also called to serve God and others in their daily life. We are called to be missionaries right here and right now!

So how do we know how each of us is called to “fulfill all righteousness?” How do we live into the promises of our baptism? How do we discover our vocation? I believe the key is listening to God speak in our lives. This requires a great deal of disciplines and attention. We have so many voices out there drowning out the voice of God in us. In his book, “Let Your Life Speak,” Parker Palmer shares his own journey of discovering his vocation. Over the years and through a variety of experiences, he learned to “understand vocation not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.”

“There are at least two ways to understand the link between selfhood and service. One is offered by the poet Rumi in his piercing observation: “If you are here unfaithfully with us, you’re causing terrible damage.” If we are unfaithful to true self, we will extract a price from others. We will make promises we cannot keep, build houses from flimsy stuff, conjure dreams that devolve into nightmares, and other people will suffer -- if we are unfaithful to true self.

The second way is realizing that pilgrimage toward true self will take “time, many years and places.” The world needs people with the patience and the passion to make that pilgrimage not only for their own sake but also as a social and political act. The world still waits for the truth that will set us free -- my truth, your truth, our truth -- the truth that was seeded in the earth when each of us arrived here formed in the image of God. Cultivating that truth, I believe, is the authentic vocation of every human being.”

In her book, “Entering the Castle,” Carolin Myss says that “Many people who are looking for their purpose, their highest potential, are frustrated and exhausted by their quest because they think they can’t see the next step they’re meant to take. But even when that step is right in front of them --which it always is- most would find a reason not to move forward. Some would say, ‘Well, the time is just not right,’ and other, ‘I’m just not sure.’ These individuals are waiting for something that will never come: They want guidance in a package, like a severance package or portfolio... In short, they want guarantees that they will win the race before they even run it.”

The gift of baptism reminds us that we are children of God worthy of love and capable of giving it to others. We are the beloved of God who are joined into God’s work of fulfilling all righteousness in the world. We are called to be true to ourselves, not our ego self that demands recognition and power, but our self that is created in the image of God, and our self that is blessed in baptism as a child of the divine. I talked to you a few weeks ago about Father Thomas Keating’s emotional programs for happiness as power/control, affection/esteem, and security. Learning how to be true to ourselves and our vocation is a protection for us from these programs. Learning about our vocation also helps see that we are called to be missionaries in our everyday life being a parent, a Crossroad House volunteer, a teacher, a plumber, a friend, and so on.

In your bulletin today there is a “Faith in Action” insert. Please take it home and see if any of these questions in it speak to your soul. This is not a simple exercise of self discovery. It is part of our baptismal journey to claim our vocation and to “fulfill all righteousness.” Our individual work helps us be ready to work in community and use our gifts in connection to our vocation.

Next week there is going to be a meeting for the mission committee right after worship to discern where and how God is calling us to serve. What is our unique way of serving God in this community and around the world? So, as we discern individually how we are called into mission and service, we will also join to listen to how we are called as a group.

In their book, “Healing the Purpose of Your Life,” Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn tell the story about a man who wanted to be a violinist but instead became a lawyer in order to please his parents. Later on in life, he developed a brain tumor and was given only a year to live. He decided to spend his last year doing what he really wanted. He quit law and devoted himself to playing the violin. A year later he had a job as a violinist in a concert orchestra and the brain tumor was gone.

May we walk this baptismal journey as blessed children of God who are committed to fulfilling all righteousness. May we always know that whatever we do in life, we are always servants in disguise.