

BAPTISM: AN ACT OF SUBMISSION

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

LHUMC 1/12/14

Baptism series #1

I. Introduction

A. Did you know that Matthew's story of the baptism of Jesus has been called by historians one of the great embarrassments for the earliest Christians?

1. If you think about it, you can kind of see it.
2. Picture the scene—which by the way in Matthew is the first public act of ministry that Jesus carries out.
 - a) There is a great crowd that has come out from the city to see and hear and be baptized by John.
 - b) This crowd includes those who are there for the right reasons—those who really and honestly know that they need to turn their lives around and hope and pray that being baptized by John will be the first step in their repentance and rebirth.
 - c) And then there were the others—those from the religious establishment, religious politicians, really--the Pharisees and Sadducees.
 - 1) I read somewhere this week that for them, being there at the river was a case of wanting to be seen--kind of the first century equivalent of a politician kissing babies at the county fair. In their minds, it wasn't repentance that they needed, only public adoration. For those around them to say, "See they're just like us!" The desire of all politicians back to the beginning of time, right?
 - 2) John the Baptist certainly saw through them—right before today's story, he singles them out as a "brood of vipers". Never one to mince words, that John!
 - d) And almost lost among this widely varied crowd is Jesus.
 - 1) And as you read Matthew's account, you really can picture that.
 - 2) Among all the gospel accounts of his baptism, Matthew's is the most private account of the whole thing.
 - 3) You get the picture that no one else, besides Jesus and John, really know what it happening.
 - 4) In Matthew, even when the heavens open up and the Spirit of God comes down, unlike Luke's version, where the

crowd sees what is happening and reacts accordingly, here it too is kind of a private act between Jesus and his Father.

- e) So this great line has formed of those who want to be baptized.
- f) And when Jesus gets to the head of line, I picture John's eyes getting really big as he and he alone recognizes who this is who is stepping forward to be dunked in the river.
- g) And you picture them whispering to each other,
 - 1) John says, "Don't we have this backwards? Shouldn't I be getting baptized by you?"
 - 2) I can sort of relate—the first church that I served after leaving seminary was one that was filled with retired pastors, some of whom were well-known in the conference, and that moment for me came at communion, when one of them would come up in my line and I'd always feel like saying what John said, "Shouldn't you be doing this to me?"
 - 3) And Jesus says back, "No, this is the way it has to be" and kneels in the water before John and is baptized by him.

B. So do you see the problem for the earliest Christians, both politically and theologically?

- 1. Here's what they had to be thinking:
 - a) If this is really the Messiah, the true King sent by God to overthrow the oppressors (namely the Romans), this is certainly a strange way of announcing himself.
 - b) Shouldn't he have been anointed with the finest virgin olive oil as we did King David and our other kings?
 - c) What was he doing, allowing himself to be anointed with the muddy water of the Jordan River instead?
 - d) What kind of King is this? Is this the kind of king we were hoping for? Is this the kind of king we really want?
 - e) And if he really is the Son of God as God says he is here for the first time, why did he think he needed to be baptized anyway? Wasn't he perfect to begin with?
 - f) And if he really is the great high priest, as others hoped he was, what kind of priest is this who in his first act as a pastor kneels at the feet of one who is beneath him in order to be baptized? As John himself says, "Shouldn't you be doing this to me?"
- 2. There had to be tons of questions with this story for those first Christians, as they struggled to understand who Jesus was and how to present him to the world.

3. It's even been speculated that Matthew spent so little time on this story (only five verses) because even he wasn't sure what to make of it, and sort of hoped it would go unnoticed amidst everything else.

II. And the thing of it is, I don't think their questions are all that different from the questions that this story raises for us also. Based on what we just heard, who is Jesus for us? Based on his baptism, what conclusions do we draw about our own baptisms? What exactly is going on here? As I ponder it, I believe that Jesus is making a couple of points here, one about himself and one about baptism.

A. As to himself, perhaps he chooses this scene and what he does here to make the point simply that he is human.

1. He could have played the divinity card right off the top of the deck and started off by performing some incredible miracle, but in Matthew's account at least, he first puts himself among all of these people as if to say, "I am one of you. If I can be baptized, so can you."
2. And know that Matthew immediately follows this story up with the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by Satan, another story which emphasizes his humanity—"if I can be tempted, so can you."
3. In Matthew's gospel in particular, the story of Jesus' ministry begins with these flashing neon reminders that the Son of God came as a human being.
4. Matthew is reminding us that before he began his magical, mystical, miracle tour, he was one of us, born in a stable, baptized in the river.

B. And then even more so, Jesus' actions here speak volumes about baptism, and so this story becomes the starting point of our journey over the next couple of weeks to examine what exactly is happening when a person gets baptized and what exactly does it mean.

1. If we get nothing else out of today's story, it has to be that above all, baptism is an act of submission.
2. As Jesus submits to be baptized by John when it would seem that it should be the other way around, we hopefully begin to understand that whether we have been sprinkled, dipped, or dunked; whether we have come to the font or gone down to the river, it is always an act of submission.
 - a) No, Jesus didn't need to be baptized for the repentance of his sins, for he was the one human who was and is without sin.

- b) But perhaps he did need to be baptized to remind himself and us that a part of the meaning of baptism is that it is always about submitting to our Father's will, or even beyond that, that when we are baptized, we are recognizing that we are completely dependent on God and God's will for our lives.
 - c) Or in other words, baptism is always about God, and not us.
 - d) Or in even other words, baptism is always an act of God, and not an act of us. (And we will talk more about this in two weeks when we hear from Paul as he struggles with some folks in Corinth who don't understand this).
3. And what is really interesting in all of this is that as United Methodist who believe in and practice infant baptism, we should understand this.
- a) For any time we witness a baby being baptized, we see first-hand this reality that baptism is an act of submission.
 - b) We see this completely dependent, utterly helpless human being submitting themselves to the water, which becomes a symbol not just for the cleansing of sin, but also of the will of God, not just in the life of that child but also in the lives of the parents and us in the congregation as we pledge to raise that child in the faith.
 - c) Will Willimon puts it like this: "In our modern culture that overstresses human autonomy and human independence, for us the practice of infant baptism is a visible, strong, reminder that we began the Christian life in utter dependence...I hope that it is also not an overstatement to say that when the church baptizes an infant or a young child, the church is reminding itself that, no matter what the age of the recipient of baptism, we never grow out of our complete dependence on God. We never become so adult, so adept at the faith that we do not have to daily reach out for the grace of God to give us those gifts we could not earn ourselves." (*Pulpit Resource*, Jan.-March, 2014, p. 12)
 - d) He's making the further point there that it really doesn't matter how old a person is when they are baptized, that age doesn't matter when it comes to our dependence on God. That in the end, whether we are two months old or twenty or eighty, it is always an act of submission to God.

III. Conclusion

- A. As I've thought about the story in these terms, I've realized that all of these years I've missed what might be the key verse in the whole story.
1. It may not be when Jesus goes down to the river, or even when the Spirit comes down on him like a dove.
 2. It may actually be in his answer to John as to why it has to be that he let John baptize him.
 3. He says, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this fulfill all righteousness."
 4. There's that magic word—righteousness.
 - a) In the Bible, it means "right relationship with God."
 - b) And unfortunately it is a word that we good Christians so often get wrong.
 - c) So often we equate "righteousness" with following all the rules.
 - d) And when we do that, what we think to be our "righteousness" turns quickly into "self-righteousness" as we begin to keep score to see if I am doing a better job of following the rules than you are.
 5. But what if our righteousness had more do with submission? Isn't that what Jesus is suggesting here?
 6. Isn't he saying that in order to fulfill all righteousness, he has no choice but to submit to John to be baptized, and at the same time, to submit to God through that baptism?
 7. Do you realize what a game-changer that is? When we understand that true righteousness comes not when we try really hard to be good boys and girls, but instead when we totally submit ourselves not just to God but also to those we and the world have considered to be beneath us?
 8. The other word that comes to mind when I think about it like that is "servanthood".
 9. So what if Jesus is teaching us about the relationship between baptism and servanthood?
 10. That when we are baptized, we are fully initiated into full servanthood to God and to the world, and that it is a life-long journey?
 11. Again, Willimon says this: "Think of the Christian life as life-long training in submitting to God, in allowing our lives to be out of our control, in learning to live as dependent creatures in a culture that keeps telling us we are independent creators of our own lives. In other words, remember your baptism and be thankful."

B. Remember your baptism and be thankful. Amen to that!

1. Today we also remember Jesus' baptism and are thankful.
2. We remember that as he submitted to John the Baptist and to God, he was showing us that through our baptism we have become servants not just of him, but of the world.
3. Thanks be to God for the gift of baptism, thanks be to God for the gift of submission and servanthood to him and to the world.