

What Does Righteousness Look Like?

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:15-17

“I 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, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

Last Sunday, Brian challenged the faithful remnant gathered on New Year’s Day to become Bible-ish. By that I think he means for us to become so immersed in the biblical narrative—from beginning to end—that we are able to connect the dots and hear the echoes of meaning that resound in these words as they presently bear witness to God’s living Word. Put another way, he dared us to take our clues for the Christian life not first from the church’s doctrine and dogma, but from our own encounter with Scripture. While I am a firm believer that doctrine and dogma is the church’s collective wisdom about what Scripture has to say, I mean to take Brian seriously this Sunday, first by listening carefully for a few of those echoes in the story of Jesus’ baptism (there are too many to fit into one sermon!); and then, with this story as our lens, to ask what it might look like for us to follow Jesus in the year ahead.

Not by chance, the first words out of Jesus’ mouth in the Gospel of Matthew are words that Matthew alone put in his mouth: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” It was a conversation stopper—or at least a sentence that ended what was a bit of an argument between Jesus and his first cousin John. I think it also was a sentence written to end an argument in Matthew’s community about what sort of Messiah Jesus was. Finally, I believe it is a sentence written so that we might begin to follow *this* Messiah, and not another, into the season of Epiphany, the season of discipleship, seeking to live under the reign of the God that his living presence is revealing, even now, among us.

Although we know nothing of the origin of baptism as practiced by John—John simply appears in all four Gospels baptizing people in the wilderness—it is clear that those who submitted to John’s baptism were sinners and subordinates. For John, the baptizer had to be greater than the one being baptized. When John sees Jesus approaching him, he knows immediately that Jesus is, in John’s words, “more powerful than I.” Not only that, compared to Jesus morally, John is beneath Jesus, unworthy even to carry his sandals. This is the world John’s community understood. The social order of Matthew’s day was hierarchical and viewed human behavior through a lens of honor and shame, causing many in Matthew’s community of skeptical Jews to be offended by the story of Jesus’ baptism.

Therefore in the first place and in order to draw his first readers in, Matthew depicts John with one foot in the old familiar order, locating John’s understanding of baptism in a hierarchy of power and piety. He adds to Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism a disagreement between John and Jesus that mirrored the disagreement happening in his own community. Apparently their exchange continued for quite a while. The NRSV reads, “John would have prevented him” from being baptized, but the better translation would be, “John was preventing him.” Like Matthew’s community, John thought that to lower the King of the Jews into the waters of baptism was to shame him. John was the one who should have been baptized by Jesus. You can imagine John demurring and Jesus insisting, back and forth and back and forth, until Jesus finally says, “Let it be so for now” or “Let it go for now,” and John does. Jesus’ insistence that John baptize him should have been John’s first clue (and was meant to be a clue to Matthew’s community; and is certainly a clue for us) that a whole new ordering of human relationships had begun that day in the Jordan River, an order based not on power and piety, not on worth and wealth, but on the unsettling reversals of God’s reign. If you read ahead in Matthew, you will literally stumble on these reversals as God’s kingdom begins to take up space on earth: where the first become last and the last first, where sinners are given seats of honor and religious authorities rebuffed, where one’s welcome into eternal life seemingly depends on your being intimately involved in the hungry being given food, the thirsty being given clean water, the naked being clothed, the sick being given health care and the prisoners visited. In fact, for those with ears to hear, Jesus goes on to say that this reversal is precisely the reason he must be baptized by John: “...for it is proper for us, *in this way*, (a way that turns our human ordering and valuing inside-out and upside-down), it is proper for us, in this way, to fulfill all righteousness.”

In the second place, I imagine John shaking his head as he consents to baptize Jesus, for John’s definition of fulfilling all righteousness and Jesus’ definition had to be at odds. Given that John’s baptism was a baptism for

repentance, he would agree with Miriam Webster that righteousness was a quality of being morally right or justified. To *be* righteous was to be free from guilt or sin; to act according to the moral law. Surely this is the definition of righteousness that led Matthew's community to be baffled by Jesus' baptism. If any human being ever were righteous in this way, *that* person would have been the Messiah.

But if we take our cues from Jesus, the *way* of Jesus' baptism was the beginning of the reversal of religion's hierarchy that righteously separated (and continues to separate) the moral from the immoral, the clean from the unclean, the saved from the damned in God's name. The righteousness Jesus was born and would die to fulfill is a righteousness that has to do with the reconciliation of heaven and earth, of God and sinners, of God's creatures with one another. Righteousness is about being reconciled. In Jesus, God would accomplish this not by God's punishment of sinners but by God's identification with sinners, by God's full immersion in the hopes and fears, the trials and tribulations of merely human beings, by God's complete assumption of our lives lived under the threat of death and death-dealing powers. So Jesus begins to fulfill all righteousness, to right our relationship with God and one another, by joining us East of Eden, in our God-forsaking condition, so that in him our rejection of God, our refusal of the relationship for which we were made, the distance we have kept from God will come to an end.

In the third place, lest we miss two easily missed little words, Jesus fulfills all righteousness not by himself but with John's participation. He says, "...it is proper *for us* in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then, Matthew reports, John consented. I do not want to make too much of this, but I am taken with the detail because, from the beginning, "*for us*" alerts us to the fact that the redemption accomplished in Jesus is a story that involves us every step of the way to the cross. From John's perspective and in the beginning, he was a participant in the shaming of the Messiah by his baptism even as, in our resistance and denial of him, we become a necessary part of the plot that ushers him onto the shameful cross. We consent and are complicit in his assumption of our humanity. He comes to us in the wilderness of *our* skepticism, inserts himself into *our* religious rituals, tussles *with our expectations* about what sort of savior he is and then *puts himself in our hands*: hands that will betray him; hands that will hand him over to death; hands that are necessarily a part of God's saving us in this way. It is proper *for us* in this way to fulfill all righteousness.

Finally, once up and out of the water, the reconciling of heaven and earth begins! "Suddenly the heavens were opened to him," we read: it is the beginning of the end of the distance between *heaven and earth*. God's Spirit descends like a dove and lands on him. If you are Bible-ish, you notice that Matthew is borrowing the dove that signaled the beginning of God's second go at creation after the flood, after the waters receded, after the rainbow sealed God's promise that never again would death triumph; and in the parting of the heavens Matthew is evoking the parting of the waters as Moses led the people to freedom and safety as well as calling to mind the crossing over of God's people to the promised land with Joshua; and finally Matthew is calling to mind Elijah's mantle passed to Elijah at this very place on the banks of the Jordan River! Because Matthew's community *was* Bible-ish, they connected all of these dots; they heard all of these echoes.

But only when Matthew had connected Jesus with the story that had shaped his community from the beginning, could they hear the truth spoken by a voice from heaven declaring: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Hearing those words, Matthew's community now had to be completely undone by the coincidence between Isaiah--Abraham's Son, the Beloved, the bearer of God's promises who was saved from sacrifice--and Jesus, God's Son, the Beloved, the bearer of God's promise to the Gentiles, who now begins to make his way to the cross.

I imagine after hearing Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism, more than a few from Matthew's community of skeptics were ready to follow this Messiah in order to see where he would take them. And what of us? If this is the Messiah we mean to follow into the New Year, his baptism will lead us, more and more, to find ourselves at odds with what passes for righteousness in this culture. In his company, we will literally begin to stumble on the reversals where God's kingdom is taking up space on earth: where the first become last and the last first, where sinners are given seats of honor and religious authorities rebuffed, where our welcome into eternal life, into the love that God is, seemingly depends on our being intimately involved in the hungry being given food, the thirsty being given clean water, the naked being clothed, the sick being given health care and the prisoners visited. This is what righteousness looks like. This is what it looks like to live into our baptism. Thanks be to God!