

Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And 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. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday, I was sitting in on the sermon exchange adult Sunday School and we were talking about the wise men who came to visit the Christ child. We'd been talking about whether there were actually 3 and whether they were kings or wise men and where they came from when I asked, "Well, why do we like this story today?" Kim Berche, without any hesitation, said, "The story reminds me that God will provide. There were Mary and Joseph and the baby and they had no money and no place to stay, but God found a way to provide. And God finds a way to provide for us, too."

And I thought, wow, there's a sermon there for sure. I tried to remember whether I'd said anything like that, but I realized it didn't really matter. Kim is a wise and gentle soul and I'd be glad to have her preach to me and to us any time she wanted to. And I could say the same thing about lots of the people in this congregation. Pastor Wendy and I have been called by this congregation to lead worship, to host at the table, to proclaim the Good News in and for this congregation, but that certainly doesn't

mean that we are the only people qualified or gifted to do these things. Last week in confirmation, we talked about what it means to be Lutheran, and surely one of the things it means is that all of us become priests of this God of ours when we are baptized. This emphasis on the priesthood of all believers helped me as I thought about today’s Gospel reading.

The baptism of Jesus is recounted in each of the Gospels, but only Matthew tells of any conversation between John and Jesus. Matthew tells us that John says to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replies, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” These are the first words Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel. And I confess to you that I could never settle for myself what Jesus meant when he said this.

It might be that by being baptized by John, Jesus was fulfilling a prophecy about the Messiah being baptized, but no one has ever found evidence of any such prophecy in the Older Testament. It might be that by not insisting on doing the baptizing, Jesus was showing his humility, but that doesn’t really say why Jesus needed to be baptized in the first place.

As I did more research, it turns out that “to fulfill all righteousness” really might be better said as, “in order to do what God intends.” I found that helpful.

As we’ve seen, John the Baptist is very much a human being, a little flawed, a little angry, sometimes full of doubts, but nonetheless doing the work God wanted him to do at the time and place God wanted him to do it. For Jesus to seek out John to be baptized by him tells us in no uncertain terms that God in Christ is in a very real way making common cause with humankind in spite of our flaws and shortcomings. God is becoming one of us in the way that really defines who “we” are.

You see, in baptism, we **become** the people of God in two different ways. First, when we are baptized, God claims us as God’s own. But second, when we baptize, we **become** the church. Later on today, when we baptize young Teagan James Willis, God will claim Teagan as part of God’s family, just as God has claimed all of us. But another thing happens -- we, corporately will reassert that we are the Body of Christ in this place, whose job it is to help teach Teagan and each other the Word and the faith and provide him and each other guidance and support and love and to make this place as much as we can, a taste of what the Kingdom of God will be like when it comes. That’s a tall order, but it is what we are saying in the rite of baptism.

When Jesus seeks to be baptized by John, Jesus is laying out how the people of God are going to be constituted and he is becoming a part of this flawed but sacred community. Now think about this for a second. John seeks to block him by refusing to baptize him, not because John opposes him, but because John knows his own limitations, his own sinfulness. “I should be baptized by you,” he says “but you come to me?” Ask yourself this – would *you* be willing to baptize Jesus? You are allowed – in an emergency, any Christian can baptize. But would you? If you don’t, if you’re too modest or too shy or whatever, if you refused, you would be frustrating God’s plan for the Kingdom of Heaven as Matthew describes it. You see, in order to do what God intends, Jesus has to accept ministry from sinful, flawed people, people like John the Baptizer. People like the disciples, like Peter, like Mary Magdalene. And people like us.

How often, when I talk to people about being part of some ministry, do people say, “Oh, I couldn’t do that.” “I’m not a leader.” “I don’t like to speak in front of people.” “Oh, I wouldn’t know how to begin.” John probably didn’t either. But Jesus pushed him, Jesus asked him. And so he consented.

Being a disciple means saying “yes” to Jesus. Even though we aren’t perfect, even though we aren’t good in front of people, we’re not leaders, we don’t know how to begin. And I think about our Sunday School teachers, who are able to keep the attention of 20 first graders for a half an hour and I say to myself, wow, I couldn’t do that. And I think about our members like Carolyn and Bob who stood in this pulpit and talked about their stewardship. Or I think about the confirmands who come up here on Pentecost and talk about their faith journeys and I think, wow, that takes some courage. And I think about the Wolfs and the Blatts and the Dangins and all the people during the height of the Christmas season when the hours are already pretty full, who spend days working on the Tree of Angels and I think, gee whiz, where do they get the energy?

But being a disciple means saying “yes” to Jesus. It means ignoring that voice that says you can’t do something or that you aren’t a leader, or you don’t know how to begin, and, instead, saying “yes” to Jesus. I heard an interesting statistic this week from Rhonda Byrnes, author of *The Secret*. She was saying that the average person has 60,000 thoughts a day and 80% of them are negative. The difference, she says, between happy people and unhappy people is that happy people refuse to believe these negative thoughts. That seemed helpful to me – you can’t easily control your thoughts, but you can choose not to believe the ones that tear you or other people down.

In the end, John consents. He doesn’t become a perfect person. He remains angry and flawed and very human. Very

much like us. But he consents, he says “yes” to Jesus when Jesus asks for his help in doing what God intends. In the coming days and weeks and months, Jesus may ask for your help in doing the work of the Kingdom, in helping in small and large ways to do what God intends. Say “yes.”

Amen.