

Week of December 27, 2020

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. ¹⁴ John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?"

¹⁵ Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness."

So John agreed to baptize Jesus. ¹⁶ When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. ¹⁷ A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

An Unusual Request

I'm a part of a small group of Presbyterians that can say I remember my baptism. It's not because I have a particularly stellar memory - I don't - it's because I was baptised in a tradition that does not baptize infants. I had a "Believer's Baptism" and was dunked, not sprinkled, when I could articulate my own desires for that Baptism. This is one of the biggest differences between Presbyterians (and Methodists and Episcopalians) and more evangelical denominations. Nowadays the arguments about what constitutes a "true" baptism boil down to simple theological differences at the best of times or petty name calling at the worst, but at one time it was serious business, even leading to armed conflict between Presbyterians and Anabaptists! We baptize infants, recognizing that God claims all of us, and believe it's time when the whole church recognizes that claim and promises to raise the child in the faith and support them as they grow in that faith. Others believe it's a personal decision about one's own desires to enter a life of faith. If I'm to be totally honest, when I was baptised at 7 years old, it had nothing to do with my own desires. It was because I thought it's what my dad wanted, so I answered the alter call and was baptised the next week. And it's not just me, for many people, that's what baptism is - something you do because it's expected. As Christians, we've done a poor job of articulating what baptism is all about, leading to this strange expectation of a sacramental practice without reason. And that brings up a common question about this passage - why was Jesus baptized?

John offered his own kind of baptism - a ritual cleansing to show that you had committed yourself to changing your ways, turning away from sin, and turning toward God. Jesus, however, did not sin, so his request to be baptized by John was strange. Even John thought so - he wanted Jesus to baptize him instead! But Jesus said no, it had to happen "to fulfill all righteousness." Very cryptic. Righteousness is one of those big theological words that gets thrown around a lot without much explanation or meaning, but it means divine justice. In this case, one might see the righteousness Jesus was fulfilling as divine approval. Indeed that's what happens here, Jesus is dunked as and he rises out of the water God's Spirit descends upon him and God's voice booms, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him." Unlike my baptism, which also occurred on the foundations of parental approval, there was more happening here than Jesus making God happy. It wasn't his being dunked that was important, it was God's claim of him after that mattered. God's approval of Jesus was proof of who Jesus was and what his ministry was all about. By being baptized, Jesus wasn't saying he needed forgiveness for sins or to create a new life for himself, he was being announced as God's beloved. Karl Barth put it well, "Jesus Christ is the Lord who became servant by going into the far country and concealing his glory. But by his condescension into servanthood, the Lord does not disfigure himself. He reveals his true nature

as one who came not to rule but to serve.”¹ This baptism was about service.

In our baptisms our parents and the congregation make promises to help us - they, too, become servants. They are serving us by being our teacher, friend, counselor, companion, etc. They serve God by teaching the faith to a new generation, thereby living into their own faith. One of my favorite descriptions of a sacrament is “an outward sign of an inward promise.” Baptism is the outward sign of water sprinkled on a little head and promises being made by God’s people, a reminder of the promise that God has claimed our lives as God’s own. That inward promise reminds us of God’s grace and forgiveness, of Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection, and of God’s call on our lives. Even though many may not be able to remember their baptisms, we can remember the promise of them in our own willingness to serve. So serve we will.

Servant God - in a simple act of baptism Jesus was announced as your Son, your beloved child, the servant king of creation. May your Spirit descend on us, whom you love, that we may dedicate our lives to your service as we teach the faith to friends and strangers and as we offer help to those in need, healing to the sick, freedom for the prisoner, and food to the hungry. Amen.

¹ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/1, p. 59