

Matthew 3:13-17

The Lord's Servant

A few years ago I was in the break room at The Home Depot reading, Unbroken, the story about Louis Zamperini, the American olympic runner who was taken prisoner by the Japanese in WWII. Perhaps some of you saw the movie version that came out a couple of years ago. In the story, Zamperini is singled out for brutal torture because his captors recognized him as a famous olympian.

After the war he claimed to be so angry that *he lived* to be able to return to Japan and hunt down and kill his captors. Before he had the chance to do that he had a religious experience at a Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles after which he said he never again experienced the human emotion of anger. When he finally went back to Japan and visited some of the guards who had beaten him, it was to forgive them rather than to kill them.

One of my co-workers asked me what I was reading and I told him the story and when I got to the part about forgiveness he said, "No way, that would never happen if it was me." I wondered in disbelief as he refused to be inspired by this one man's miraculous journey from obsessive anger to amazing grace.

The Meaning of Jesus' Baptism

The word "epiphany" means, "to appear," and in the Christian calendar refers to the events surrounding the appearance of Jesus as a human being. It marks not only the Incarnation of Christ in the birth but also his appearance in Galilee as a proclaimer of God's truth, a teacher, and a worker of miracles. Among the events celebrated are the visit of the Magi, the wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the Baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River.

It is our task today to learn what it means for us that Jesus was baptized. There are some things to mention along the way that may help us in our questioning. For instance, in the gospels care is taken to present Jesus in accord with Jewish prophetic tradition, which at the time was best exemplified by John the Baptist who was leading a movement of repentance and forgiveness, mostly out in the countryside in Judea. Part of the prophetic tradition comes from the book of Isaiah, passage called the "servant songs," in which the Lord's servant is depicted as a suffering servant who brings justice and righteousness and redemption, but not by force, instead by sacrifice. One such passage is in Isaiah 42, listen to some excerpts:

"Here is my servant . . . I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations . . . In faithfulness he

will bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.”

And then goes on as if to speak directly to him,

“I, the Lord have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you, and make you to be a covenant for the people, and a light to the Gentiles. To open the eyes that are blind, to free the captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

The gospel tradition associates Jesus with the prophets because he joins the movement of John and with Isaiah’s suffering servant because at his baptism God puts His Spirit on him and he hears the blessed voice that says, “This is my son, whom I love.” This connection shines a light on the biblical themes of divine sonship and of righteousness. So let me speak also about these things

Sonship

One of the central components of Christianity is that Jesus is God’s Son. Being intimately related to God stands in contrast to the idea that there is a great distance between the human and the divine. The gospel discovery is that this distance has been overcome, even to the point of claiming that *we too* are

God’s children. This idea is explained in Romans 8 where Paul writes,

“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received a spirit of sonship, and by him we cry, ‘Abba, father.’ The Spirit testifies with our spirits that we are God’s children.”

Righteousness

The biblical emphasis on righteousness is an expression of the great human hope that the world’s life will somehow be made right.

That there will be an end to pain and suffering caused by poverty, and war, and disease and injustice, an end to deceit and corruption, that the truth will come out and the systems of power and wealth will be fair and applied not only to the powerful and wealthy but to everyone. There are only partial and sometimes twisted versions of justice in the world today, but we are promised a better justice

On a personal level we experience the pull towards righteousness when we think about forgiveness. There are times when in relationships people do confounding things that tear apart the bonds of love, like the way the guards treated the POW’s, and we know that it is

right even when it is hardest, and wonder in disbelief at our failures to give and receive it.

When we think about these things we are often disappointed because they are not a part of the world's reality and we are suspicious that our leaders can't be trusted to make them happen. Having been let down we come to despair of righteousness rather than hope for it. But let me get back to the meaning of Christ's baptism.

Baptism: Participation In the Life of God

To be baptized means to be immersed in something. If it is water, then what you get is wet, symbolizing inner cleansing. But it is hard to leave it there, Jesus was not baptized for cleansing. Baptism also means to be wrapped up in something, consumed by it. The baptism of Jesus means that he was all wrapped up in the life of this world. Our baptism in Christ means that we are all wrapped up in the life of God. It is into his life that we are baptized when we accept him by faith. The life of the world and God's life come together in Jesus, and also, because of that baptism, in us. Truthfully, this sermon got all muddled up in my mind and I had a hard time clearing it up. Let me see if I can un-muddle it a little.

The promise of the gospel is that our despair is temporary and that justice with mercy prevails in the end. It doesn't seem like we should have to have all this; church buildings and denominations, pipe organs and praise bands, missions offerings and evangelism conferences, Sunday Schools and social ministry teams, the whole lot of it, just so we can say out loud what should be obvious.

That all people everywhere are God's children; and that we should love them. That we should be ready to forgive at every opportunity, not only those close to us but even those far away, those we call our enemy and who have done us great harm. And that the world we make together should be fair and kind. And that we need some help.

While they may not write a book or make a movie about our life's story like they did old Zamperini, we are redeemed and forgiven just the same, and given opportunities to forgive, and also opportunities to serve. And that makes us a part of God's life in this world so that like Jesus, we become the Lord's servants as we are changed from a, "no way, not me," unbelief, to a, "come to think of it, haven't experienced anger in 65 years," faithfulness, or whatever miracle your life brings you, and our lives become miraculous journeys like so many before us. That is what it means that Jesus was baptized.

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