**January 8, 2023 Matthew 3:13-17**

***Fulfill All Righteousness***

**Scripture:** *Matthew 3:13-17 NRSV*

*(13)Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. (14)John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (15)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. (16)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. (17)And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

**Notes:**

1. Imagine ***standing*** on the shore of the Jordan river.
   1. People get in line, each and every one a ***sinner***.
   2. Truly repentant ***sinners***, are most willing to be changed.
   3. The ***self***-***righteous***, see no need to change.
2. God’s people do not ***act*** the way God’s people should ***act***.
   1. Turn away from your ***sinful*** ways and turn to the ***Lord***.
   2. Get ***ready***; the day is coming soon.
   3. It’s your life that must ***change***.
3. As John ***confronts*** the religious leaders,
   1. In the midst of this ***chaos*** Jesus enters the water.
   2. Being ***willing*** is what matters.
4. Jesus addresses our doubts about being ***worthy*** of baptism.
   1. ***Grace*** is the issue; ***Obedience*** to God is the issue.
   2. “We talk about God’s ***love*** for sinners, but go to a lot of trouble to not be ***mistaken*** for one.”
5. Jesus wanted to fully ***identify*** with those he came to save.
   1. Baptism has to be done ***publicly***.
   2. We are all sinners redeemed by ***grace***.
   3. Acknowledging our ***fault*** and asking for ***forgiveness***, fulfills all righteousness.
   4. Baptism is an ***outward*** sign of ***inward*** grace.

**Script:**

As your pastor, I look at many things. What can I do to strengthen the walk of those who are part of this congregation? What things are we doing that are effective and what things make little if any difference. What needs to be changed? What can I do to encourage the lost to come to Jesus for the grace and mercy that he offers. And so, I look around at the things that are taking place and consider how I can do a better job at this calling in my life. I also look at you, I try not to be judgmental, I try to be compassionate, and I try to extend the same mercy and grace that I received from Jesus to each of you.

As I look around the sanctuary, I wonder many things. Who among you have asked and received Jesus’ forgiveness? Who among you have been fighting the invitation from Jesus? Who among you proclaiming to be forgiven, are truly living out the Christian faith you profess? Who is struggling with this Christian faith? Who seems to be putting on a front, pretending to have it all together when you don’t? Who among you have stumbled and fallen? Who after stumbling and falling, have picked yourself up and asked for Jesus to take you back? How can I help? And if I am not able to help you, where can I point you towards to find help?

The fact is many of us seem to have it all together, but I have been around long enough to know that many of us, do not like to admit when we are on the edge of disaster. This world is full of obstacles, toils and snares that are waiting to catch us off guard. That is why it is important to always be on our guard and striving to live as closely to the will of God as possible. Today we look at an event in Jesus’ life and wonder, “why does Jesus need to do this?” Join me in our reading this morning found in Matthew 3, verses 13-17.

*Matthew 3:13-17 NRSV (13)Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. (14)John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (15)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. (16)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. (17)And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Imagine being there, standing on the shore of the Jordan river. John is preaching, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Matthew 3:2*” Into the muddy waters of the Jordan they come, one after another, seeking the cleansing that John is offering. People gather and get in line, like Ethan the tax collector, who is looked at as a traitor by his own people. We also find people like Simone the harlot, everybody knows her reputation, they know who she has been with and what she has done. We also find people like Reuben who dealt donkeys and was known to roll back the mileage on the older models before passing them along to somebody else, and Silas who sells kosher meats down at the market and has been caught on occasion putting his thumb on the scales. Each and every one a sinner; there is no other way to describe them, they are sinners one and all. Not an innocent one in the bunch.

Yet, the ones who know what they are and what they have done, are the ones who are most eager to be something else, something better. Sinners who are truly repentant, who are most willing and eager to be changed, redeemed, and start life anew. Jesus says it himself. But those who are righteous, or at least think of themselves as righteous, see no need to change. But on this day, there in the Jordan river, is enough sinners to make this baptism service to go well past noon.

This is just the type of crowd an evangelist like John looks for. John is on his own mission. He wants to change the face of his beloved Israel. In his thirty some years he’s been a keen observer of the life of this nation and its people, God’s people. He is observant enough to identify that God’s people do not act the way God’s people should be acting and they are not coming across as a very chosen people. SO John is here, emerging from his wilderness training, where he has been getting his rabbinical training. Time spent in solitude with God. The message is simple and repetitive, “*Repent, Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Matthew 3:2*”

John’s message has three points, like I have been told all good pastors do; his first is repent. Turn away from your sinful ways and turn to the Lord. There is nobody among us who is without sin. The only way we are able to cleansed and stay clean is to stay away from the sin in our lives. Stay away from the things that brings you down and causes you to sin.

His second point takes us in a slightly different direction. John knows the Kingdom of God is near and the Messiah, God’s anointed one is near. SO John shares these words, “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Matthew 3:3*” John is telling one and all that they need to get ready; the day is coming soon.

Johns final point is directed straight at the Pharisees and Sadducee’s, the religious leaders; right at the religious elite. These are the righteous people, the ones who think that they have nothing to repent from; they believe they are above reproach and that they are without flaw. Perhaps they come to be baptized like everybody else. But John responds by questioning their motives, feeling very confident that there is no sincerity to be found in them. John sees through their charade and he is not being a part of their façade. John tells them, “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Matthew 3:7*” in other words; what do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It’s your life that must change, not your skin! And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as your father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life.”

As John confronts the religious leaders, the others watch in silence. Ethan the tax collector, Simone the harlot, Reuben the used donkey dealer, and Silas the heavy thumbed meat butcher; all standing there drenched to the bone from their dunk in the river, thinking, “If these guys aren’t worthy of baptism, how can I be?”

And it was right in the midst of this chaos that Jesus enters the water and stands before John. Right there in the center of the turmoil caused by sin and hypocrisy, not to mention the loud voice of John preaching. I imagine everybody just stops and turns to see this man standing there waiting for John to respond. Confidently Jesus leans forward and whispers into Johns ear a few words. And immediately this loud preacher who had just been condemning and chastising the religious leaders is taken back to a mere mumble. “*You, you, you… you want me to baptize you?! No, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong. I need to be baptized by you, not you by me*.”

This is where we hear the first recorded words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, “*Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness*. *Matthew 3:15*” With trembling hands, John takes Jesus and immerses him into the muddy waters of the Jordan River. Can you imagine what John must have been thinking as he lowers the body of the Messiah into the water and draws him back out. All these self-righteous people coming for validation and here is the one who needs no validation coming to ask Johns help in fulfilling all righteousness. I am sure it was difficult to comprehend.

I remember one of the first persons that I anointed as a pastor was my own mother. With my hands trembling, I took the oil and placed it upon her forehead and prayed over her. It was one of the toughest things I have ever done as a pastor. But I cannot even begin to grasp the magnitude of what John was experiencing as he baptized Jesus. As Jesus emerges from the water, he bears a big toothy grin and embraces his cousin John in a bear hug. In that instant, all those standing around doubting themselves and their worthiness; including Ethan, Simone, Reuben, and Silas, know instinctively that being worthy of such a thing isn’t the point. Being willing is what matters.

Jesus has come to address your doubts and fears, he has come to answer your questions in regards to being worthy of baptism. If religious leadership is not worthy how can I ever be worthy? By being baptized, Jesus answers these questions. By being baptized that day, Jesus lets us know that worthiness is not the issue. Grace is the issue. Obedience to God is the issue. Baptism is not a rite of passage. Baptism is not an initiation to some club or organization. Baptism is not something that needs to be done when you reach a certain age or complete a certain level of training. Baptism is done to fulfill all righteousness; which means that it is done to submit yourself to life in God’s kingdom.

In a book written by Ann Patchett called The Patron Saint of Liars, we find the story of a woman named Rose and her daughter Cecilia. They live in Saint Elizabeth’s Home for Unwed Mothers. Rose is a cook and 15 year old Cecilia has become a sort of mascot for the place. One day Cecilia meets one of the new residents named Lorraine. Lorraine is very nervous as she waits to be interviewed by Mother Corinne. Cecille decides to give Lorraine some advice. She tells Lorraine, “The guy who got you pregnant, don’t say he’s dead. Everybody says that. It makes Mother Corinne crazy.” Sitting on her hands nervously, Lorraine says, I was going to say that. So what do I tell her?” Cecillia responds, “I don’t know, Tell her the truth. Or, tell her you don’t remember.” Lorraine looks at Cecillia and asks, “What did you tell her?”

Cecillia is speechless. She has never been mistaken as one of them – one of the weak people whose bad decisions had derailed their lives, who had done something so shameful that their own families had packed them off to live with some strangers until the evidence could be put up for adoption. Cecilia thought she was going to pass out because she had been mistaken for a sinner.

If Jesus would have done it Cecillia’s way – if he had done it our way – he would never have gotten into the water. He might have declared himself a friend of sinners, but he wouldn’t ever want to be mistaken as a sinner. He could have stayed on the bank of the river and praised God for every soul who stepped into the water in faith and submission. He might have said “I feel your pain.” He could have acted like one of them without being one of them. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “We spend a lot of time talking about God’s love for sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble to not be mistaken for one of them.”

Jesus wanted to fully identify with those he came to save, he wanted to fully identify with sinners, “to fulfill all righteousness,” and he was willing to be mistaken for one if it was necessary. That is why baptism isn’t just a personal thing. In order for baptism to be baptism, it has to be done publicly… with sinners gathered around. We all, each one of us who watch as well as those who go under the water, those who have never entered the water and those who did it a long time ago; we are all sinners redeemed by grace, all flailing away in the same boat of sin. And to come together in worship and baptism is to acknowledge our fault – every last one of us – and ask, all over again, for the forgiveness that fulfills all righteousness.

In the weeks to come, I ask that you consider your salvation; consider your Christian walk; and consider where you stand with Jesus. Give thought to baptism; if you have been baptized, what does that mean to you. For those of you who have asked and received forgiveness but have not been baptized, what are you waiting for. Baptism is an outward sign of what is going on inside of you. An outward sign of inward grace.

I have designated May 28th as baptism Sunday here at our church. On this day we will celebrate Pentecost Sunday as well; I will have the water prepared and I will baptize those who wish to take this step of faith, demonstrating what God is doing in your life and Christian walk. I have a few who have already expressed an interest in being baptized, I invite those of you who have not yet been baptized to do so on this day. My hope is that on this Baptism Sunday, that each of us will experience our baptism either for the first time or we experience it once again. It is the only way that we can be like Jesus, the one who was willing to be one of us.