

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Baptism of the Lord
Sunday, January 8, 2023
10am

Text: Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Have you ever done a polar bear swim? I have a few times at our conference camps. A true polar bear swim happens in the winter, but the waters at our summer camps stay sufficiently cold in the mornings to produce a similar effect. This past summer at Camp Indianola we woke the campers up early to take the plunge into Puget Sound. It was early August, but the weather was unseasonably cool, gray and overcast with a breeze. I watched from the deck as the campers locked arms and waded into the water. On a count of three they ducked beneath the waves, surfacing with whoops of shock and delight. Afterwards they scrambled to the shore, where they were met with warm towels and hot cocoa. As I watched the kids' exhilaration, I was reminded that a polar bear swim is as much about the comradery as it is the thrill of a cold-water plunge.

Polar bear swims happen all over the world across many different cultures, often at the beginning of a new year as a ritual of purification and renewal. Many Orthodox churches have a tradition of throwing a wooden crucifix into a body of water on Epiphany Day (January 6). Swimmers race to retrieve the cross, which will bring good luck in the year ahead. The ritual commemorates the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. For the Western Church, Jesus' birth is God's great sign that God dwells with us. But in the Eastern Church, it is Jesus' baptism. It is Jesus' baptism that marks the miracle of the Incarnation.

Matthew does not speculate about how Jesus felt or what he thought at his baptism. Whether Jesus knew he was the Son of God before he waded into the water is immaterial to Matthew's gospel. Because the point is that Jesus *is* the Son of God and the Son of God came to be baptized. And the fact that the Son of God was baptized matters a great deal for who we understand Jesus to be.

John is certainly surprised to see Jesus on the riverbank. And why? Because the baptism he is offering is a baptism of repentance, and the Son of God has no sin to repent of. “Why do you come to me to be baptized?” John asks. “It is *you* who should be baptizing *me*” (pp. v. 14).

Jesus doesn’t answer John’s question. “You don’t need to understand why,” he tells his cousin. “All you need to know is that this is God’s will, and we are commanded to obey God’s will. Don’t get in the way of what God is doing” (pp. v. 15). After hearing these words, Matthew tells us that John “consented” – obeyed – the will of God and baptized Jesus.

Obedience is not a popular topic in our culture. Bishop Will Willimon once wrote, “We’ve created a world in which we need not be obedient to anyone but ourselves.”¹ Our civil society treasures individual freedom above all else. I hold our great American experiment in self-governance in the highest esteem, but let’s not fool ourselves: It has its downsides. When individual freedom is a society’s primary value, we will inevitably struggle to compromise, to find a common purpose and direction, and to hold ourselves together in unity. It took fifteen votes for the House of Representatives to elect its new Speaker this week. They got it done, but boy was it a slog. And even though Christians claim to know a better way, the church does not always *do* better. As one of my colleagues quipped on Facebook, “I still bet it takes less ballots to elect a Speaker of the House than a United Methodist Bishop.”

We squirm a little at preaching on obedience because the church has such a terrible history of using biblical obedience as a weapon to bludgeon people into submission. But there is no avoiding the theme of obedience in Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ baptism. Jesus has come to the Jordan to “fulfill all righteousness” (v. 15). And righteousness, as we learned a few weeks ago, is following God’s command. Righteousness is discerning the will of God and then obeying it.

The church’s exhortations to obedience are based in our theology of baptism – certainly our individual baptisms, but more importantly Jesus’ baptism. An element of our baptisms is repenting of our sin – acknowledging that sin is something we all struggle with. In the waters of baptism we encounter God’s grace, the antidote to sin, and are set free from the power of sin through that

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-12/sunday-january-12-2014>

same grace. Repentance is an active turning away from sin. In our baptismal vows we promise to “Renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent.”² Repentance is a choice we must make over and over again, a way of being that we discipline ourselves to.

But the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, implies more than just a turning away from. It also implies a turning *toward* and a *transformation into* something new. In baptism we turn *away* from sin and turn *toward* God, who transforms us in the image of His Son. In the ancient church, when a new member was baptized, they turned to face the east, the direction of the rising sun, and ritually set their backs to the west, the direction of darkness. They physically oriented themselves toward God’s dawning light, a light that would spiritually set them free into the new creation they were becoming.

This is why Jesus came to be baptized: To demonstrate the freedom that comes with *metanoia*. This freedom is more than just a freedom *from* the powers of sin and darkness. It is also freedom *for* a mission, a turning toward God’s purpose for each one of us. God sets us free from sin so we are free to serve God and one another in love.

At his baptism, Jesus is commissioned for *his* mission and *his* purpose. And that mission is to “fulfill all righteousness” by becoming the Servant of humanity. Isaiah foretold this when he prophesied the Father’s words,

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him...” (42:1).

After Jesus’ baptism, the Father confirms Isaiah’s prophecy by sending His Spirit upon Jesus and declaring from heaven, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). God is pleased with Jesus because at his baptism Jesus chooses to submit himself to his Father’s mission for his life – a mission that will eventually end in death on a cross for the purpose of our salvation.

Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>

⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross” (2:5-8).

In imitation of Jesus’ baptism, Christian baptism is a call to humility and obedience. When we are baptized, we take vows before God and our faith community. If we are baptized as infants, our parents take those vows on our behalf until we are old enough to confirm them for ourselves. Whichever way the vows are taken, they are sacred. They are a sacred commitment to live a life of metanoia, of transformation. The discipline of turning away from our sin and toward our God is just that – a discipline. It is a muscle we build, a daily choice and commitment to follow Jesus and allow God to transform us in His image. It is a daily choice to obey the will of God in our lives rather than our own will.

Sometimes we will struggle to discern between our will and God’s, mistakenly confuse our will for God’s, even choose our will over God’s. But the Holy Spirit, given to us at our baptism, will always call us to account. And because God’s grace and forgiveness is bottomless, we will then have the choice to repent – to turn – once more and start over. As we journey the life of faith, choosing daily obedience to God and God’s kin-dom way of being, we will find that gradually our will begins to look more and more like God’s will. We will find that our lives begin to take on a cruciform shape – the shape of servant-hearted love.

Shortly we will participate in a ritual of remembering our baptisms. This is an invitation to renew our commitment to our baptismal vows, to recommit ourselves to following Jesus and living as Christians obedient to God’s will for our lives. If you have been baptized, you may come forward at the appointed time and touch the water in the baptismal font in a way that is meaningful to you. If you have not been baptized, you may still come forward and touch the water.

God's grace is for you, too, and the invitation to baptism is always open. If you feel led today to explore baptism and reception into God's church, I am available to talk. Each of you has also received a card with John Wesley's Covenant Prayer to help guide this time of sacred reflection and renewed covenant with God.

At the very beginning of his public ministry, we meet Jesus not as a healer or a teacher or a prophet, but as obedient to the will of God upon his life. God does not call us to the same obedience as Jesus. It is Jesus alone who fulfills all righteousness. But God does call us to practice righteousness by following Jesus. I have been a disciple long enough to know that sometimes this can feel like a burden. It can even feel painful, like plunging into icy water. But if discipleship is ever painful, it is always an invigorating, purifying, transforming pain. And we have the assurance that whatever obedience God calls us to, Jesus has already walked that path, straight through to the glory of resurrection. He has made the road by walking it for us, and now we are called to follow him into his kingdom.

Thanks be to God! Amen.