

Sermon A19Epiphany1  
January 12, 2019  
North Fork Ministries  
Gospel:  
Matthew 3:13-17

*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."*

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Biblical scholars have debated for centuries over the question of why Jesus was baptized. John was baptizing "for repentance", so why would Jesus, thought to be without sin, need to repent. This conversation between Jesus and John the Baptizer takes place only in Matthew, not in the gospel of Mark or in Luke. Matthew, apparently, found it useful in compiling his account of Jesus baptism, to try to explain just why Jesus sought to be baptized. And so we have this dramatic encounter: Jesus taking his place in a long line of folks waiting to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. When John sees that Jesus has made his way to the head of the line of baptismal candidates, John protests to Jesus. "Come on man, I need to be baptized by you. What are you doing here?" And Jesus answers, rather cryptically, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

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In the summer of 1969, I was spending an evening exploring Los Angeles' famed Sunset Strip, when I was approached by a figure that could have passed for John the Baptist. A Jesus freak. He offered me a "righteous meal." When I hear the word righteous now, I think of the health-giving bowl of vegetable soup I was being offered. But it was a bowl of soup with strings attached. It would have required that I endure a sermon, a lesson, some hymn singing, some bible readings...in other words – church.

That kind of righteousness was the last thing I wanted. I was discovering the world of Southern California and righteousness didn't enter into the picture. Truth be known, I was seeking liberation, for myself and for those I saw around me. The civil rights movement was in full swing. Protests against the war in Vietnam were everywhere. Some sense of justice in the world sounded like a good idea. Righteousness sounded to me like something you might find in church, a word that, in my mind, was always preceded by self, as in, self-righteousness – something I had already seen enough of in my 17 years. Righteous or not, it seemed more important to me that everyone just got a meal, and a seat at the table.

It is unfortunate that I only read the Bible in the King's English then. Had I read Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism in another translation, I might have saved myself a lot of wandering in the wilderness, forsaking righteousness and seeking justice. An interesting thing has happened in my preparation to preach on Sundays. I start the process by studying and meditating on the Gospel lesson – sometimes reading it in a few different translations. When I started preaching in Spanish, I naturally read the gospel in Spanish as well. Jesus' explanation to John the Baptist - that he sought baptism in order to fulfill all righteousness, reads rather differently in Spanish. In explaining to John the Baptist why he should be baptized, Jesus says, "que cumplamos toda justicia" – so that justice will be served. Every Sunday at this table we are offered a good righteous meal. It's a meal that feeds us, unites us, shows us that we are loved by God like a mother loves her children, like a mother welcomes her children to the table, eager that they eat the nourishing meal she has prepared. But it is also a meal in which justice prevails. At such a table no one is excluded and everyone gets their fair share.

I wouldn't pretend to be qualified to speak for women on this subject, but I can say that for most men I know, obtaining your father's approval can be a lifelong endeavor. Even when we act like it's no big deal, for a son to hear his father say, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," are words of unimaginable power and fulfillment. Some of us get the approval of our earthly fathers and some of us don't. Whether we receive

it or not, doesn't have much to do with what is fair or just. We might work hard all our lives, we might choose the wrong career to please our fathers, or we might react against our father's desires and take the wrong path, just to escape the domination. But as faithful people of God, we have the Father's assurance of love. An assurance that we too are called Beloved, that we are accepted as we are. In God's kingdom, justice has prevailed, and we are children with whom God is well pleased.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, tells a story in the Jewish mystical tradition of Kaballah. "In the beginning there was only the holy darkness, the Ein Sof, the source of life. And then, in the course of history, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand, thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light. And then, there was an accident, and the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. And the wholeness of the world, the light of the world, was scattered into a thousand, thousand fragments of light, and they fell into all events and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day."

Jewish tradition teaches that the whole human race is a response to this accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible once again and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world.

And this is the task to which we are called. We are here to restore the world. It is the purpose of all people who have ever been born, all people alive today, and all those babies yet to be born. We are called to be the healers of the world.

When John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and Jesus was anointed for the work he was called to do on earth. The baptism we receive as Christians, is an anointing as well, an anointing that brings to mind our calling, our calling to set things right, to discover the scattered holiness that surrounds us. We are all called to be healers – to heal, to restore that part of the world that touches us.

Baptism, considered in this light, is a ritual of identity. Each of us has experienced a calling. Baptism is the recognition, the acknowledgement of that calling. Our quality of life is dependent on our willingness, our ability, to live into our true identity as healers, as restorers of the world.