

Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

BAPTIZED INTO SERVICE

A number of years ago, a new student arrived in a taxi at Union Seminary in New York City. Noticing a white-haired man in shirtsleeves standing by the door of the dormitory, the student asked rather arrogantly, "Hey, mister, do you work here?" Hearing that the man did, the new arrival commanded, "Then you may take my bags up to Room 309." The older man silently picked up the two heavy suitcases and trudged up the three flights of stairs to the door of 309. The student followed, holding only his raincoat and a light briefcase. When the door was opened, the new student casually offered the man, who carried his luggage, a small coin. The gentleman with the white hair politely thanked the young fellow but declined the tip.

The following day, the newly arrived student joined the rest of the seminary community in the opening communion service. He was shocked to see that the man he had assumed was the porter was wearing a pulpit robe and presiding at worship. When he whispered to a neighbor, the young man learned that the white-haired man was the present of Union Seminary, the esteemed Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin. Rushing up to President Coffin afterward, the student began to stammer his apologies for so brusquely commanding Dr. Coffin to carry his bags the day before. The renowned Dr. Coffin allowed himself a small smile, and gently answered. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. We must do likewise." It was the most important lesson that young ministerial student learned during his three years at Union Seminary.

Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God, came to serve rather than to be on the receiving end of things. That truth is made clear especially in Matthew's gospel lesson for today. All four gospels allude to Jesus' baptism by John, but only Matthew gives us this brief conversation between John the Baptist and his cousin, Jesus.

Inn the town of Nazareth, when Jesus heard that John was baptizing with water in the Jordan River for the repentance of sins, Jesus knew that the time was at hand for the beginning of is public ministry. So, he left is family, his carpenter's bench, and his boyhood town, and he set out to find John. When Jesus came to the Jordan River where John was baptizing, Jesus intermingled with the multitude of people until he stepped forward to be baptized by John. John was hesitant to do so for he told Jesus, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Thus, John baptized Jesus.

Why did Jesus need to be baptized – especially since baptism was offered for the repentance of sins, and Jesus was without sin? A number of answers to that question have surfaced through the years and most go along with the idea that stresses Jesus' solidarity with sinners. Even though Jesus was without sin, nevertheless, he identified himself with those who were searching for God and seeking to be saved from their sins.

While that's a good answer, it doesn't go far enough. There is simply more than Jesus' consent to be baptized by John than just to relate to those he came to save. Once again, why was Jesus baptized? The best answer is found in Jesus' own words, spoken in response to John's hesitancy to baptize this One, who was more powerful than him, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. When John said to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus responded in so many words. "For now, this is how it should be, because we must do all that God wants us to do." (*The Contemporary English Version of the Bible*).

In these first words out of Jesus' mouth, set forth in Matthew's gospel, we come to understand precisely why Jesus was baptized. Everything that Jesus did – as he moved about Galilee and later came to Jerusalem – he did as the obedient Son, who carried out the plan of the Father. Jesus came not to be served but to serve God in faithful obedience. In fact, as someone said, "When Jesus cried on the cross, 'It is finished' it was his baptism that was complete." (Brett Younger)

Jesus, by his response to John, identified himself as the long-awaited Messiah. However, his role was not to be a conquering warrior or an all-powerful king or some sort of magic genie, who granted people's wishes and wants. Rather, Jesus' role as Messiah was more in line with Isaiah's suffering servant, who sought to do the will of God. While Isaiah may have thought in terms of a certain individual or even the nation Israel, it becomes clear that Jesus identified himself with the suffering Servant. After all, like Jesus, the suffering Servant was in right relationship with Yahweh; and, he too was the one who gave his life for others. Because of his faithful service to God, Jesus, the Son, also understood that he was sent to serve others, no matter the cost. Every hurting, hungry, diseased, alienated, suffering, and/or sinful person was to be his mission field for his business was to be God's business.

In time – following Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – the early Church embraced Jesus as Lord, the Messiah who was sent forth to suffer and die, and liberate people from their sins, and who was raised up from death to enable people to live in God's presence, now and forever. Furthermore, the Church realized that Jesus' agenda had been passed on to his disciples (and that includes us!). We too are called to submit to God in faithful obedience, and we too are baptized into service for the sake of others. Like Isaiah's Suffering Servant, and like Jesus our Lord and Savior, we too are called and sent out to be a light to the nations. Jesus' mission is our mission, and nothing less.

This morning we will install six new elders, who will lead and serve in the fashion of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who came not to be served but to serve. Along with the pastors and other elders, their main task is to discern the will of Christ and then carry out God's plan as faithfully and as best we can. Obviously, the Session cannot do it all, and that's why, quite often in the Sunday bulletin, where the church staff is listed, just above that you can read, "Ministers: all member of the church." It takes all of us to be the Church and, with our many and various gifts from the Holy Spirit, it takes all of us to serve those in need.

As we remember Jesus' baptism, let us be sure to remember and act on our own baptism by doing God's work on behalf of others. Like Jesus, at our baptism and throughout our lives, God sends forth the Spirit and says, "This is my son, my daughter, my beloved ones, with whom I am well pleased." And, in the same breath, God says to us, "Now, get to work. Let the light of Christ shine through you into the shadows of a hurting world."

Then, here's the beauty of it all: as we live in faithful obedience to God and in service to others, that's precisely when we experience true freedom and real, lasting fulfillment. Richard J. Foster wrote in his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*: "Obedience is not as burdensome as it seems at first blush. We are doing nothing more than falling head over heels in love with the everlasting Lover of our souls." So remember your baptism by claiming yourself to be a beloved child of God and by going about and doing God's business, serving other people.

Dr. Fred Craddock tells the story of Frank who lived in the little town where he was a pastor. Frank was a hard-nosed rancher who wanted nothing to do with church or religion. He told every preacher who tried to witness to him to leave him alone and let him mind his own business. Everyone was surprised, therefore, when at the age of 77 Frank asked to be baptized.

When asked why, he replied, “I didn’t know then what my business was. Dr. Craddock writes, Frank discovered what his business was. It was to serve human need. So I baptized Frank. I raised my hand and said in the presence of those who gathered, “Upon your confession of faith in Jesus Christ and in obedience to his command, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. ‘Do you remember that? Do you remember that?’” (*The Cherry Log Sermons*)

As disciples of Jesus Christ, let us remember our special calling to be God’s beloved and faithful and obedient children. And then, let us remember that our baptisms lead us to join Jesus in the muddy waters of the Jordan River, demonstrating our solidarity with and our commitment to the service of all others to whom God sends us. We are baptized to serve. As we remember, and as we act on the meaning of our baptisms, let us be beacons of light to the nations. In that way, we give glory to God’s holy name. Amen.

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