

Submitting Unto Baptism

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

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John does not like baptizing Jesus. It goes against every bone in his body. John is out in the desert near the Dead Sea – a harsh and unforgiving environment, and has been preaching for people to repent and be baptized there in Jordan River. John seeks to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah so he preaches with zeal and passion about justice and God. And when John talks about the coming Messiah he says, “He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry” (Matt. 3:11).

So when Jesus shows up to be baptized, John knows this is it! He is the One! His first instinct is to bow down to Jesus, to walk over and ask Jesus to lower him under the waters in baptism. But Jesus prevents him and says, “No, you are to baptize me. I’m submitting to you; I give up control and I want you to lower me into the water.”

John doesn’t like what he’s hearing. This is the Messiah! And Jesus is not measuring up to his expectations of what a Messiah is.

How many times has Jesus failed to measure up to our expectations? How often does the church, Jesus’ body, fail to measure up to your expectations?

Woody Allen ends one of his movies by having a character say, “I don’t hate God. I think the worst thing that can be said about God is that God is an underachiever.”

For many of us that's our problem with God, Jesus, and the church – they're all underachievers. They just don't measure up to what we want, what we expect, and what we think.

Many of you know that there have been a whole slew of books written by agnostics and atheists over the last few years. With lots of sick and bad religion running around, they have plenty to write about. Generally speaking though they are not much more informed than the bad religion they're criticizing. One of the writers has been Bart Ehrman, a professor at the University of North Carolina, who is still mad about his childhood religion. A couple of years ago he wrote *God's Problem*, in which he said that God's big problem is human suffering. He said that God promised to do something about human suffering and then did nothing. God's problem is that God simply does not live up to expectations in dealing with human suffering and anguish.

When we are in anguish; when there is some natural disaster, when someone is suffering, we inevitably ask, "How can God allow this to happen?" We know that to be human is to be weak, limited, and vulnerable. But to be God is to have power, complete unlimited power. That's who we expect God to be.

Today's Old Testament lesson is from the prophet Isaiah who says that God will send a "servant" who will bring forth justice to the nations. Isaiah says that the servant will come as one who is gentle and lowly. In fact, the servant is so gentle that he will not "quench a dimly burning wick" and he will not break a "bruised reed." This servant will work in a way that is gentle and nonviolent.

Early on the church heard this passage from Isaiah as an apt description of Jesus. The church, beginning in Matthew's Gospel, came to see this passage from Isaiah as speaking about Jesus – which is why we read this passage from Isaiah

alongside this one from Matthew. Jesus is the servant who was lowly, humble, and gentle. This is who Jesus is. This is who the Messiah is. This is who God is. And this is how God in Jesus works. Furthermore, this is who the body of Jesus, the church is supposed to be and how we are to work.

But John doesn't get this when Jesus shows up to be baptized, just like the church has not gotten it for most of the centuries since. John wanted someone greater. He wanted someone spectacular and powerful just like we want a church that is spectacular and powerful.

Jesus is greater but for Jesus what it means to be greater is to submit to the lesser one. Over the next pages of Matthew's Gospel we will hear Jesus spell it out: the last shall be first, the least greatest, the humble exalted... Here in his baptism, we see Jesus embody his humble submission. He shows us who he is and what he is about by how he is baptized, by how he submits to John.

This morning I want to remind all of us that we are called to submit. This is our calling. In our baptism we die to ourselves and put our very lives in the service of Jesus Christ in Christ's body, the church. The Apostle Paul tells us that "we are to submit ourselves to one another in reverence to God."

Now I'll be the first to say that what I'm telling you is a hard pill to swallow. Submit and submission are not good words for many of us. And, often it is not a good word for good reason. Submission has often been used to abuse and oppress or exploit people. Some of you have felt it. This is not the will of God.

But just because submission and servant-hood has been abused does not mean that in its proper form it is not part of the calling of God. We should submit to God and to one another. How we do that is a life-long process of learning. But the irony of God is that in submitting, God's power of love and grace are let loose

into the world.

This is who the church is called to be – to be like Jesus who submitted himself to God’s calling and gave up power, gave up being spectacular, gave up power, and became a servant.

My friend, Greg Jones, the dean of Duke Divinity School, wrote a column in *The Christian Century* about his teenage son who has two t-shirts. One he received at a conference and it says, “Accept Nothing” on the front and “Question Everything” on the back. The second t-shirt says on the front, “Loser” and then on the back it says, “Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it (Luke 9:24).” The son does not like the “Accept Nothing/Question Everything” t-shirt and won’t wear it. The kid says, with great wisdom, “All it does is give everyone a reason to be cynical.” But he wears the “Loser” shirt; it is his favorite t-shirt.

We are a congregation who tends to like the “Accept Nothing/Question Everything.” But beware; be careful, because it easily descends into mere cynicism in a cynical world.

There are times to be skeptical; there are times to rear up on our hind legs and shake our fists and to say “I’ll not put up with that anymore!” But it is also true that we are called to lose our lives in Jesus, to submit to God and to submit to one another.

As we remember our submission in baptism, let us prepare to submit to one another as we share at the Lord’s Table.

Amen.