

“Fulfilling All Righteousness”
Matthew 3:13-17
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It seems only appropriate on the occasion of the Baptism of Christ Sunday, that I should come clean about, that I should confess, my own ignorance. I am, it is true, ignorant about many things, particularly about those things having to do with calculating the area under a curve, as I painfully learned failing calculus twice in college, or how to make the bed in any conceivable way that satisfies my wife. But in addition to those things, I feel compelled to confess my longstanding ignorance, until this week, of what was meant when Jesus said to John at the Jordan River, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” For as many times as I had read that passage, and reflected on it, I had never really quite understood what Jesus meant. I could not find any applicable Old Testament passages about prototypes of the Son of Man being plunged under water; Moses and the Hebrews barely got their feet wet crossing the Red Sea on their escape from Egypt. I could remember no prophecies about the need for the Messiah to get his head wet with anything but oil; that is how it was done to King David and the rest of God’s anointed leaders. It didn’t make sense that the sinless one should be baptized for the repentance of sins, which is, after all what John was doing in the Jordan. And so, I admit it, I was stumped, grounded by my ignorance about something which was clearly so important that the Spirit took flight to make it known to everyone.

But God is merciful, and a kindly United Methodist pastor by the name of Erin Martin has laid it out in such a way that it made me realize that the reason I couldn't understand was because I was looking for clues in the wrong direction, that instead of looking backward in time, I needed to look forward to understand the significance of Jesus' statement. You see, Jesus' statement, or more accurately his act of being baptized, is itself prophecy, an act which foretells not only the greatest story of righteousness, namely Jesus' obedience unto his own death on the cross, but an act which patterns righteousness itself for those who would follow him. Let me give Ms. Martin the chance to speak for herself with this quote. She says this: "When Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized in the Jordan River by John, John's first impulse is to resist the gift. For John, it is all wrong. Jesus is the greater one, Jesus should be the one to baptize him, not vice-versa. What John doesn't yet understand, perhaps because Jesus' ministry is just getting started, is that what it means for Jesus to be the greater one *is* for him to submit to the lesser one. Soon we will hear it everywhere Jesus goes: the last shall be first, the least greatest, the humble exalted. In Jesus' baptism, we don't hear Jesus preach this message; we see him embody it. Jesus' gift to John is the gift of submission. The long-awaited Anointed One allows himself to be plunged into the water by John and as a result, emerges from the water as the Beloved Son, the Suffering Servant. It is Jesus' submission that is pleasing to God, for it "fulfills all righteousness." In baptism, we too emerge from the water as beloved sons and daughters whose new

life, in the pattern of Christ, is one of servanthood. We too are given the gift of submission. The challenge,” she says, “for those of us who are baptized is to live into the gift of our own transformation.” Thank you, Erin, for that gift.

This then is the very definition of righteousness, to live a life of obedience and service during which God’s Word is enacted in everything you do (and say) as you place others before self, give up the desire for dominion and exaltation, wash the feet of others. Just as God is pleased with Jesus in his submission, so too is God pleased with us in ours. Let it be said clearly that Jesus is not the Beloved Son as a result of his act of submission, but rather he is able to submit because he knows he is the Beloved Son. The statement the voice from Heaven makes, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased,” that statement is for those who, like me, were too ignorant to catch on in the first place. It is a declaration of a proud father observing his boy become a man, not that of a mad scientist that has flipped the switch on his new creation. What father would not be proud that his son had demonstrated to the world the essence of what life is all about, what God created us for, even in the face of a temptation not really so different from what Jesus will endure for forty days and forty nights beginning in the very next passage? You see, Jesus’ defining act of righteousness comes in the midst of the opportunity to glorify himself at John’s expense, and indeed at the expense of all those for whom he was given, instead of humbling himself the way he did. That, my friends, is righteousness. That is love in action. That is the gift Jesus gave John, and us.

“The challenge for those of us who are baptized,” says Erin Martin, “is to live into the gift of our own transformation.” And it is the challenge of a lifetime. It is the challenge of a lifetime not because we labor for it all our lives until we suddenly get it, like a prize, but rather, it is because we get it, that we labor at it for a lifetime. I’d almost say that we have no choice but to do it, to live into the gift of our transformation, but the fact is that we do have a choice, a daily choice that will confront us each morning of our lives, or even every moment of our lifetimes.

What is it though, that defines that daily righteousness? What is it that makes the daily decisions for righteousness different from any of the other thousand decisions we make every day? It is all well and good to say that those righteous decisions are the ones where we put others first, but even that is only so many words. Perhaps we should think about it as did the great Reformer Martin Luther, when he wrote about Christ’s baptism that, and I quote, “The Son, who is without sin, allows himself to be baptized for our example and our comfort. He does something here that is not required of him, whereas we do nothing that is not required of us. More, we do what is evil. How will we ever get to the point of doing something not required? Christ is holier even than baptism, yet still allows himself to be baptized.” You will probably not be surprised to learn that Luther believes it to be baptism that enables us to “get to the point of doing something not required.”

Indeed, it was Luther’s practice, when he felt tempted by demons and evil spirits to cry out, not “I believe,” but “I am baptized.”

I think Luther is on the money when he makes the distinction between doing only what is required of us and doing something not required. As much as I cherish that wonderful passage from Micah 6:8, “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” I wonder if it lets us off the hook too easily by starting with, “And what does the Lord require of you?” That was John’s thinking, that he was required to be baptized by Jesus because Jesus was the greater. And because of it, he almost missed the opportunity of a lifetime. It took the gift of Jesus’ persistence for him to do that which was not required, but optional, when he consented to baptizing Jesus. It is not as if doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God isn’t already a tall order, God knows it is, but when we put it in terms of what is required of us, I wonder if it doesn’t actually lower the bar for doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God. Even by those definitions, John was right to do just what he intended to do. It took Christ to change his mind.

So what is doing “something not required?” Well, Biblically speaking, maybe it is the difference between caring for the widow and the orphan in their distress and doing something to make sure widows and orphans aren’t distressed in the first place. Socially speaking, maybe it is the difference between recycling and cutting back on the consumption that makes recycling necessary. Spiritually speaking, maybe it is the difference between tithing and generosity. But generally speaking perhaps it is simply the difference between winning and doing your best.

I caught just the end of a movie this week chronicling the life of distance runner Steve Prefontaine, better known as Pre, who was killed in an automobile accident in 1975 not long before the Olympic time trials in which he was expected to qualify. In the movie, his coach offers a moving tribute that he concludes by reminding those gathered what it was about “Pre” that made him special. This is what he says, “All my life, man and boy, I've operated under the assumption that the main idea in running was to win the race. Naturally, when I became a coach I tried to teach people how to do that. Tried to teach Pre how to do that. Tried like hell to teach Pre to do that. And Pre taught me. Taught me I was wrong. Pre, you see, was troubled by knowing that a mediocre effort can win a race and a magnificent effort can lose one. Winning a race wouldn't necessarily demand that he give it everything he had from start to finish. He never ran any other way. I couldn't get him to, and God knows I tried...but... Pre was stubborn on holding himself to a higher standard than victory. ‘A race is a work of art’ is what he said and what he believed and he was out to make it one every step of the way. Of course he wanted to win. Those who saw Pre compete or who competed against him were never in doubt how much he wanted to win. But how he won mattered to him more. Pre thought I was a hard case. But he finally got it through my head that the real purpose of running isn't to win a race. It's to test to the limits of the human heart. That he did. No one did it more often. No one did it better.”

Well, clearly Steve Prefontaine was not Jesus, who did just a few things better he, but he did seem to understand a few things about the righteousness to which Jesus calls us in our baptism. Indeed, the quote which survives Steve Prefontaine is one which seems to embody what Jesus and John were all about in the Jordan River that day. Steve Prefontaine liked to say, “To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the Gift,” and even though in his own life that Gift may have been swift feet, the Gift in each of our lives, the gift we need to be focused on, is the Gift of grace and our response to it, how we will not sacrifice it, but use it to bless others as we ourselves have been blessed. May God help us as we are about the lifelong challenge of fulfilling all righteousness by embodying the truth Jesus revealed in his very first public act, the truth he would tell for the rest of his ministry, that those who would be first must be last, that those who would be exalted must humble themselves. Amen.