

Baptism, Worthiness, and Obedience

a sermon based on Matthew 3: 13-17

Children's Message - God's Agility Dogs

One of the important things about baptism is that it is a form of obedience. When Jesus was baptized, he was showing that he was going to be obedient.

Baptism officially acknowledges a person as a Christian,
and that they want to follow God.

I want to show you guys something,
a short video clip that we'll tell the congregation about.

What did you see?

Dogs yes. do you know what they were doing?

They're racing through an obstacle course. It's a dog sport called agility.

This doesn't seem to have much to do with baptism does it?

But as we said, one of the things that baptism means is that
the person being baptized wants to follow God and be obedient.

I want to point out a couple of things about those dogs.

the dogs have to go over and under and through the obstacles in a specific order.
How do they know? How come those dogs all went over the teeter totter before those jumps?

Do you think they memorize a map?

Their people told them.

Each of those dogs was being guided by his or her owner
or someone else that they are used to working with.

That is sort of how we're supposed to follow God.

The dog doesn't obey because if they don't they'll be in trouble.

They obey because they want to be rewarded by their trainer.

They want to make their trainer happy. They also may want milkbones.

At this level of competition though,
those dogs know how great life is when they follow instructions.

Those obstacle courses can be a lot of fun.

Some dogs still screwed up.

That first dog was disqualified after that tricky part with the jump.

What happened then? They kept going.

They finished the course and did so really well.

The dogs have the misfortune of being at the mercy of people,
but still, did you see any of those trainers upset with their dogs when they finished?

No - they were celebrating,

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even those that knocked the jumps down and went through the wrong end of the tunnel.
God's the same way.

He won't stop being the loving God he is when we screw up,
and he welcomes us to keep going with Him.

Adults' Sermon

I suppose I have to stop talking about dogs now.
That's okay though - because this baptism stuff is every bit as exciting.

Baptism is a sacrament, one of two recognized in our church -
the other we get to celebrate next week - Communion.

I want to take a look at this word "sacrament"
because it has more than one meaning.
The original Greek idea has to do with mystery.
That is, with Truth that can't be fully understood.
When the word goes through Latin, it gains the meaning of "being set apart."
So, in baptism, we are set apart from the rest of the world in a sort of mysterious way.
It can be looked at as a way of firing your culture,
or at least those aspects of it just are not doing you any spiritual favors.
In entering Christian life, one has a different set of methods for dealing with life.

Well, let's get into it, because this is a really cool story
and I'm not going to get to say everything I want to as it is.

One of the things that struck me about this story was that
Jesus seems really concerned with doing things properly.
Usually Jesus is taking pains to turn the world on its head.
He usually doesn't seem to care much about cultural expectations,
or doing what is socially acceptable.
Even religious rules are re-worked.
Not in this story.

Here Jesus seems very concerned that he go through this ritual of baptism.

Now, perhaps a good question would be if this was really a "proper" thing.
After all, baptism isn't mentioned anywhere in the Old Testament.
I won't pretend to actually know much about this,
but from what I've heard of the history,
baptism was a common rite of initiation in Jewish communities of the first century. Regardless, it
was a ritual thing, and Jesus seems very intent on going through it.

Even though this is Baptism of Christ Sunday,

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I want to spend some time thinking about the baptizer - John.
Often, the story of Jesus's baptism is used as an example of Jesus's Obedience.
I can see that - but I think John gives us a much better picture of obedience here.
Yes - the guy who was trying to change Jesus's mind about the whole baptism thing.

In the Greek, this is even stronger,
and tells us that John had been *forbidding* Jesus to be baptized by him.
(or so I'm told - I don't know much Greek my own self...yet.
I am so looking forward learning that language.)
And yet I still think this guy who is refusing the Son of God
is being obedient. After all, he does give in.

You know, John was right.
He also happened to be at the same time wrong,
but his argument is a good one.

He recognizes Jesus for who He is.
He knows that Jesus is the one he's been telling people about.
The one who will baptize in fire and the Holy Spirit.
Makes John's baptism in water seem lame in comparison.

Now John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.
What does Jesus need that for?
It should be noted that "repentance" has nothing to do with feeling guilty,
it has nothing to do with regret.

As Nancy Deever told us Christmas Eve,
the Greek word that this repentance idea is based on
literally means a turning of the head or of the mind.
It means a change in attitude or mindset.

From this naturally follows a change in behavior, at least in theory.
Perhaps with this understanding we can get closer to an understanding
of why Jesus wanted to do this,
but remember, you have a person up here who doesn't have much of a theological education -
again, yet - I'm working on it.

John doesn't even bring up the argument of unneeded repentance.
He goes about it from the opposite direction.
He doesn't say: "Jesus, you don't need my baptism."
Instead he tells him, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized by you."

So John has plenty good reason for not wanting to baptize Jesus.

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John was right. But he only knew part of it.

His focus seems to have been on worthiness.

As he is telling people of the one who is coming and will baptize in fire and spirit,
he says that he, John, is not worthy of carrying this guy's sandals.

Now, that could be looked at as John being properly humble.

But Jesus doesn't say anything about it.

He doesn't tell John: Hey, you're more worthy than you give yourself credit for.

He doesn't tell John: Yeah, I'm really scraping the bottom of the barrel with you.

He simply says that this has to be done, so do it.

This is why the story is taken to be about Jesus' obedience.

Because he insists that this happen.

That of course rests on two premises -

First, that Jesus knows what God wants - I won't argue that one

Second, that God wants Jesus baptized. - that one seems weird.

Why would God care about anyone being dunked in a river!?

Even so, the text gives the evidence in that wonderful scene
at the end of today's Gospel reading.

The Holy Spirit coming as a dove
and the Voice of God saying quite clearly that He is pleased.

So yes, obedience.

Our baptisms also have this dimension.

By submitting ourselves to baptism
we are acknowledging that we want to be obedient to God,
and enter into life in Christ.

As is more often the case,

we are showing that we want that for our children,

since we are normally baptized before we can say that for ourselves.

Because we don't have to understand before we are claimed as God's children.

There is a lot of other stuff we don't really understand with regards to our faith.

I'm going to transition to the Affirmation here,

because creeds are a prime example.

There is a lot of sophisticated technical language in most of them.

Now, I'm one who really gets into that kind of thing,

and I think creeds are some of the most beautiful things ever written.

However, even though doctrine is supposed to be "healing teaching"
it does not always work out that way, and it can and has caused problems.

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And so for today, we're going to push the theological minutiae aside.
As soon as by the end of the second century, baptismal confessions,
that is the affirmation one gives when they are presented for baptism,
or is given for them in the case of infant baptism
- which all evidence seems to suggest did happen in early Christianity -
looked a whole lot like our Apostle's Creed.

In the first century,
Christians were less concerned about heresy,
and weren't as concerned with your understanding of
just how Father, Son, and Spirit all relate.
So baptismal confessions looked a lot more like what we are going to use today.
Let us join in this simple First century baptismal confession:
Jesus is Lord.