

The Righteousness That God Gives

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Matthew 3: 13-17

I have a good friend who once summed up the meaning of baptism by saying, “It means God is God and we're not.” That might seem a little enigmatic at first, although as a general statement it's something (at least on an intellectual level) we'd all agree with. But, it seems especially true in light of today's Gospel reading, given the fact that John the Baptist didn't even get to call the shots about the meaning of his own baptism. God is God, we're not.

The great biblical scholar, John Howard Yoder, once wrote, “To repent is not to feel bad but to think differently.” It makes sense, since the Greek word that we translate as repentance is “metanoia”, which etymologically, literally means “changed thinking.” Meta = changed; noia = thinking. And Yoder went on to point out how it seems we, with our concern that each individual make his own authentic choice when it comes to the faith, we tout its benefits and so we are in constant danger of confusing the kingdom itself with the benefits of the kingdom. Said Yoder: “If anyone repents, if anyone turns around to follow Jesus in his new way of life, this will do something for the aimlessness of his life. It will do something for his loneliness by giving him fellowship... it will do something for his intellectual confusion, giving him doctrinal meat to digest, a heritage to appreciate...it will do something for his moral weakness by giving him the focus for wholesome self-discipline, it will keep him from immorality and get him to work on time. ...But,” says Yoder, “ALL THIS IS NOT THE GOSPEL. This is just the bonus, the wrapping paper thrown in when you buy the meat, the “everything” which will be added [unto you] without taking thought for it, if we seek first the kingdom of God and (God's) righteousness!”

See, the Gospel, and consequently baptism, is about what it is that makes it possible for us to do that— to seek first the Kingdom! And so, that's the thing, it's *God's* Kingdom, God says what that is, and so God gets to say what “righteousness” is, too. God is God, we're not. I think that's what is going on with this story. John didn't want to baptize Jesus. And, it's completely understandable. John thought he had a pretty good grasp on what the righteousness of God entailed, and what the repentance was that was required of Israel for her to start truly living as God's people. He thought he had a pretty good grasp on the proper order of things in God's reign. And he knew that the Messiah would come to lead Israel back to its proper place as God's chosen people. And so, in that proper order ordained by God, he knew he had no business baptizing the Messiah. But, rather the Messiah ought to be baptizing him!

John was very concerned with righteousness, with living in accord with God's law, with God's order. He knew and announced that the Kingdom was coming, and he feared I think, what would happen if Israel didn't get in line with it. They would lose everything. So, it's understandable his reluctance to baptize Jesus. It seems a reversal of the proper order of things. He needed to be baptized by the Messiah, not vice versa. So, he didn't want to do it. He didn't want to baptize Jesus.

Well, we're concerned about righteousness, too. And, I guess for a lot of the same reasons. We're concerned about ourselves, our families, our community, our nation, our world. Maybe we're concerned about the ways we've slipped up in some areas of our lives, and what precious things we might lose because of that. Maybe we're afraid of losing our own kids to unsavory and unrighteous elements like drugs, or gangs, or maybe just the aimlessness of having been given too much. Or, maybe we're concerned about losing our community to those same elements, or to unfettered greed, or disregard for the land, or just to others who aren't like us. Maybe we're concerned about losing the nation or our world as we've known it to those things or to terrorism. Those are concerns that finally go to “righteousness”, aren't they? They finally go to all the things we think we had better start getting right, or who knows what.

You know, we're afraid we'd better clean up our act and right now, which is what we're inclined to think that repentance is about. I guess, sometimes it's even what we think baptism is about, whether it's something we do as a youth or adult, or whether in the case of some parents who think in bringing their child for baptism they are gaining some kind of magical protection for their child. It's concern for righteousness, isn't it? It's a concern about getting things "right," so that we don't lose what is precious to us.

Well look at this story. It's when Jesus mentions the requirements of "righteousness" that John the Baptist consents. Jesus knows what John is concerned with. But, look this baptism is completely different from any of the others that John the Baptist did. And it's not because Jesus behaviorally didn't need it, being without sin. But, rather since metanoia (repentance) means changed thinking, I think Jesus knew the temptations that awaited him in the desert wilderness. And all the ways the devil would tempt him had to do with trying to be God in a way that not even God is God. Which means they were all temptations not to trust that his life was held in his Father's loving hands. They were all temptations not to trust that as a vulnerable man, with no place to lay his head, still he had all that he needed.

See God gets to decide what righteousness really is. And Jesus knows that the righteousness God gives and desires is this ability to trust all of life to this God of love and let go of everything else for love's sake. So, Jesus submits to one lesser than he, because he knows that's exactly how God's love behaves in the world. *That's* what it means to be righteous. We see it over and over again in his story don't we? Remember the one who took the towel and knelt at their feet, as a slave to wash them? Remember the one who kept telling the disciples "last shall be first?" Remember the one who taught that the meek are blessed? Remember the one who let himself be labeled and killed as an unrighteous traitor... the one who "became" everything that we call sin, so that we could be released from that cycle of calling others unrighteous, evil, profane and making them our victims? So that we could be forgiven that sin which is at the center of our community?

And God said "yes" to *that* baptism of Jesus, the submitting to one lesser for love's sake... "This is my Son, the Beloved..." just the same way that the resurrection is God's "YES!" to the cross, to the giving up of life itself for the sake of love. This is a redefinition of "righteousness" that John the Baptist could have never imagined. The righteousness that God gives and desires is the faith of Jesus Christ. It was the trust that his vulnerable life was, even so, held firmly in the loving hands of his Father. That no matter what, he had all he needed to live life in the Kingdom, to live a life of love.

Someone has pointed out that etymologically the opposite of metanoia (repentance) is paranoia. And that is exactly the change in our thinking that our baptism is supposed to begin. What is to begin dying in our baptism, and what is to keep dying throughout our life as we remember the meaning of our baptism is fearful thinking, because fearful thinking leads to death-dealing. Fearful thinking leads to death. Mike Hardin pointedly asks: "Have you noticed the palpable fear of much modern Christianity? The fear of losing this doctrine or that dogma? ...The fear of others who are not like us? Have you noticed this? Have you noticed that far too many preachers capitalize on peoples' fears—particularly the fear of the other, fear of God, fear of death, fear of hell?"

Is Christianity paranoid or repentant? So baptism gives us a new vocation of living in the world in a very different way, because it's no longer living out of fear. You know, we've kind of lost the word "vocation" in our language. It's been corrupted by our notion of career on the one hand or by retreat into a monastery on the other. But, vocation as A.J. Conyers has said "is about being raised from the dead." It's about being made alive to the reality that we have all we need to live life in God's Kingdom.

So, what happens if we're afraid of losing so much that is precious to us in life, family, community, nation, world? Well, our baptism is into the faith of Jesus Christ. So, our baptism says if you want your life back, you have to be willing to stop trying to define its terms and jump in the river of God's grace! It's a leaving behind of all our fearful thinking; leaving paranoia in favor of metanoia. And so, we return to the God who is God. It is a coming back to trust. It is a coming back to the land, the earth and thus the maker of heaven and earth, and a trust in its sufficiency. In that sense, it is submission to the waters of creation and recreation.

I'm reminded of the fishing trip I took with my buddy almost two and a half years ago to Maine. We waded the mighty Androscoggin river every day, and let me tell you, us in relationship to that river was certainly a matter of submission, every day. And it wasn't the *river* that was submitting! And yet, it was pure grace. It was the essence of re-creation, and each day it gave us all we needed. Our baptism is a submitting to God's love. It is learning to let go of all that we hold near and dear in our personal, religious, or national orthodoxies, for love's sake. If we do that, we find that like our Lord, rising from those waters, we already have the only thing we need, the love of God, the maker of all life, the maker of water.

A friend of mine told me the other day of a conversation he'd had with another friend. They were discussing the upcoming surgery of a friend, who is to have a radical double mastectomy. They were just talking about all of that and what it's like to get through something like that. And he'd said to his friend, we just gotta keep going, you know. And she'd replied, "We have to live until we die, and not be afraid of either one." Either life or death. We have to live until we die, and not be afraid of either one. And judging from the baptism of our Lord, I'd say she understands the meaning of her own baptism. May it be so for me and you.

Amen.