

The Blessing in Asking for Help

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Texts: Matthew 3: 13-17

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning First Church on this Sunday when we remember Jesus' own baptism. Sometimes when I think of baptisms, I think of sweet potatoes. This might be a very odd thing to say - as sweet potatoes are starchy vegetables that go well with winter salads and baptism is a central sacred ritual of blessing, a sacrament that welcomes us into a life of discipleship and faith as Christians, an experience with water that acknowledges our forgiven and beloved status in the eyes of God. And those are two very different things, so, admittedly it's a strange association. It comes from a training I did when I was a student spiritual care provider at a local hospital several years ago. In order to be considered prepared to be on call for the Neonatal ICU floor as a student chaplain you needed to be taught how to do a baptism on the youngest infants in the hospital and they wanted us to practice before the need would arise. They had us pair up, one person playing the role of the chaplain and the other the role of a nurse or parent, and we learned how to baptize the smallest patients we would ever have on sweet potatoes. As my friend and I held the sweet potato wrapped in a Kleenex blanket and went through the motions I looked back at him when he didn't respond to a question. Tears had started to well up in his eyes. In those moments, we both understood that the reality of our dependence on God's love and interconnectedness with one another through this blessing would be present as we served families on the worst and best days of their lives, in the moments when we all would need God's grace and mercy the most. I was truly grateful for that time of preparation with our sweet potatoes to make sure we were able to be fully present for the needs of our patients in the visits done on that NICU floor that summer. So sometimes when I think about the mutual relationship and vulnerability required in baptism, I think of that first day of training and then I think of all the people including us who have been met by God's love and grace present in those baptisms that the exercise had prepared us for.

This memory came up in my mind over the holidays when I was talking to a family friend who is a surgeon at a hospital in Boston when she recounted to me how she sometimes does baptisms on infants with the nurses if the need arises. We marveled together about how beautiful it is that anyone with the intent to baptize can meet that need. All that is required is for the parent to ask and a person to be willing to bless the patient. God's grace and love are found in the actions of ordinary people - both those who ask for a blessing and those who are seeking to bless.

Today we have come to the story of Jesus' own baptism on this first Sunday of the season of Epiphany. The account of Jesus' baptism is followed by his temptation in the wilderness, the beginnings of his ministry and the call of his first disciples. It is the beginning of the time we spend with Jesus as an adult even though we were just celebrating his birth last week. We have fast forwarded about 30 years into the future in this narrative. This story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river from the Gospel of Matthew comes after a description of John baptizing crowds of people having traveled from the surrounding regions in the Jordan river. A community of people were seeking out John to be baptized in this body of water and so was Jesus. He comes to John and asks to be baptized. And at first John attempts to refuse. He says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? Or said differently, "Jesus, you should be baptizing me, why would you come to me for this?" Jesus responds in what seems like a strange and cryptic way, which is not uncommon for Jesus, saying, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

To fulfill all righteousness, what does that mean exactly? Well, in the context of the Gospel of Matthew, a gospel very much focused on Jesus' identity as the Jewish Messiah and King, the word righteousness refers to a right relationship with God and with God's law. Righteousness in the Old Testament, as some commentaries point out, is a relational concept. To be righteous is to be connected to God and by proxy to your neighbor (as we remember the law is to love God and to love our neighbor). Righteousness is not a moral judgment, but an orientation to relationship. So, a way to think about Jesus' strange reply is to hear him saying: "John, you must baptize me because I must remain in relationship with you and the humanity all around us and you must remain in relationship with me, with God and neighbor to bring about God's vision for the world." Imagine this interaction happening in a crowd of people seeking redemption in the Jordan river's waters rushing among them. Jesus was not the kind of messiah that would be separate from the people he had come to redeem. Jesus was one of many in the crowd. Not because he needed to be, but because he chose the vulnerability in asking to be served by John. He acknowledges his own humanity in depending on another for a redemptive blessing, and in doing so he continues his commitment to stand in solidarity with all the people surrounding him in search for healing.

Jesus being in solidarity with the crowds in the Jordan river is not an uncommon interpretation of the moment of his baptism. Many people have made this connection before, because it is true. Take a moment to dwell in this vivid scene of Jesus' request to be baptized in the splashes of the crowd by his cousin John, someone who has spent much time in the wilderness and feels unworthy to do much of anything for Jesus. What else can we learn from their interaction? This week, I'm struck by how easily Jesus asks for help. And how quickly John meets his need when he understands that their mutual interdependence is what God requires to make Jesus' ministry real on Earth. In this moment Jesus expresses his need to participate in this communal blessing and in doing so, he gives John a chance to meet it, to have a hand in drawing Jesus closer to his heart and to the people who desire closeness with God in the river with them.

When was the last time you gave the gift of letting someone have the chance to help you with something? Maybe you recruited more cooks for the holiday meal than was absolutely necessary, or maybe you took a chance and voiced a tender question that you've been holding by yourself to someone you trust, or maybe after

only the second time of getting lost on the family vacation you hand over the GPS to your spouse without argument. However, we allow someone else in, there is a great gift in letting others meet our needs when we express them. Oftentimes we are too afraid to share what our deepest needs are for fear that we risk vulnerability and we remain unacknowledged - deepening our wounds of loneliness, or that acknowledging the existence of our needs takes us further from a desired identity in self-sufficient independence that our broader culture holds so dear. But the thing is that perhaps God desires more for us: a life of tenderness, of relationship and humility, a life in which we witness the Son of God become one of the crowd and willingly enter into our experience of vulnerability and true interdependence- and that God was well pleased with all of it. Perhaps in the moments when we intentionally acknowledge our need for one another and accept care from each other God's grace is given room to descend on our lives like a dove.

I came across this blessing from Atlas by Jessica Grant- Domond, encouraging us to see our identity in our softness and in our willingness to acknowledge our dependence on the world outside of ourselves. As we hear it together, let us dwell on what it means for our lives that Jesus' ministry began with an honest request for help, acknowledging his own need for connection with another; She says: "Stop telling me of my strength/ instead, say that sometimes the world will offer scraps and glass pieces and dimly lit bulbs/ stop telling me of my power/ instead say that things fall apart and unravel / tell me that my world can stop with a daunting cruelty that sets other worlds in motion/ inhale with me "I will not hold up the sky" exhale "I can honor my needs"; Inhale, "I will not push through"; exhale "my no shatters chains" Inhale "I am more than strong" Exhale "God keep me tender."

God, Jesus knew that fully entering into his humanness and into the world meant letting someone else meet his need for blessing and connection to all people. God calls him beloved in that moment. His ministry depended on it. May ours as well. Amen.