

When you read the accounts of Jesus' baptism, at least in Matthew and Mark, you get a sense of the embarrassment that the early church must have experienced as they dealt with the notion that Jesus submitted to the baptism of John. For you see, John baptized for the sake of the repentance of sin. We thought Jesus was really good. Some of us even thought that he was without sin. So, why does Jesus need to be baptized for the sake of repentance? And why would he place himself under the authority of John? Jesus should be doing the baptizing. If life has a hierarchy, and it is assumed that it does, Jesus should be on the top of the hierarchy, not on the bottom. When you read the baptismal accounts in the Bible, you experience this struggle.

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have *prevented* him saying, 'I need to be baptized by *you*, and you come to *me*?' Something is wrong here. Something is out of order. Let's put it back into order. Jesus should do the baptizing. But in Jesus there is a whole new order. In him, hierarchies don't run the show. He needs to be baptized to "fulfill all righteousness."

That's strange. What does Jesus mean by those words? Is he saying that for him to be baptized is appropriate because, well you know, there are social expectations, and this is what you *ought* to do? I *ought* to bring my child for baptism because Mom and Grandma expect me to do so. Or is he saying that he knows the rules about baptism, and it's important that we follow the rules? It would be the morally right thing to do to be baptized. Isn't righteousness about being accountable to the rules and social expectations? Isn't this what it means to fulfill all righteousness: to be appropriate, to be moral?

No! For Matthew, this is not what it means. Matthew, who is addressing a group of Jewish Christians is, as we will see throughout the

year, very concerned about righteousness. Jews have always and many still are deeply preoccupied with the concept. A goal for many Jews is and has been to be righteous. Sadly, though, righteousness is often defined as being right—being appropriate, following the rules. But for the most part, in the Bible righteousness is about fulfilling the requirements of a relationship. It's about being in a right relationship.

Think about that when your goal is being right. Personally, I think that being right is way overrated. Even when you are right, it is way overrated. Being right is the kind of righteousness that many people pursue. The interesting thing is that what qualifies as right changes from person to person, from perspective to perspective. For my conservative friends, right looks like this. For my liberal friends, right looks like that. And sometimes I feel like I never can get it right. I may say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, and just not be right.

The kind of righteousness that Matthew is talking about is not that kind of righteousness. To fulfill all righteousness is a matter of Jesus living up to the requirements that right relationships bring. It's not that he is following all the rules. It is that he understands who he is and how who he is relates to God and to others.

A right relationship demands humility. A right relationship requires seeing yourself not as distinct from the rest of the human race, but as an integral part of it. Jesus must be like all of us. As we go down into the waters, he must go down into the waters. Jesus stands in line with sinners. His mission will not be punishment for sinners, as John the Baptist seemed to expect, but identification with them. Jesus is righteous, not because he is right, but because he grasps his appropriate place in the universe, his place among all other people.

Now before you start thinking that was a call to devalue himself, pay attention to what happens in the rest of Matthew's story. After John consents to baptize Jesus, we are told that as he came out of the

water, the heavens were opened to him, and the spirit of God descended upon him like a dove. And suddenly, a voice spoke from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased, in whom I delight.” As God delighted in the servant of Isaiah, God is delighting in Jesus. And he gets a special name, Son, which is to say that he represents the father.

In Biblical days, the son often represented the father or took over the father’s business. Jesus, in other words, is doing God’s business. Actually, in Jesus, the heavenly and earthly realms are coming together. Jesus is the expression of God’s face.

For Jesus to fulfill all righteousness, for Jesus to be in the line with sinners, for Jesus to understand his place in the universe is not a matter of him denying his status, of him pretending that he doesn’t have much worth, of him practicing what I call a false humility. To stand in line with sinners is not to approach life as if you constantly have to grovel before God and one another.

I love the lyrics of one of the songs from the musical **Joseph** that the brothers sing when they are in front of their now famous, big-wig brother, whom they harmed many years previously: “Grovel, grovel, cringe, bow, stoop, fall; worship, worship, beg, kneel, sponge, crawl.” Before their brother, they must grovel, belittle themselves. As you watch the show, you get the sense that they don’t really mean any of that. They are just trying to assuage their guilt and get what they want—food. Let’s tell the truth. A lot of times our false humility is a ploy. It’s a way we manipulate people.

As Jesus identified with sinners, he experienced a God who named him son, a God who called him beloved, a voice that communicated to him that he is a matter of delight, that he is just what God needs. We need, therefore, to pay attention to him. We need to listen to him. We need to learn from him. He has a special status in our lives.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't want to put you in the same place as Jesus, but maybe I do. As you brought yourself or your parents brought you to the waters of baptism, you or they were fulfilling all righteousness. Oh, it's not that you and they were meeting the demands of social expectation, even if you or they were. It's not that you or they were doing the morally right thing. No, it's that you were being placed in the stream of the great story of Jesus in which we all confront our limits, understand our place, identify with other sinners, and receive the remarkable grace of God. When the waters of baptism were poured over you, you, like Jesus, were named beloved child of God; you were told that you are just what God needs, that with you God is well pleased. *You* are a delight!

In many ways (being the good Lutheran that I am), I would like to start with that part of the story. This is the first thing you need to know. Before you hear anything else, you need to hear this: you have a place; you matter. You have an identity that is bigger than the name that was given you, bigger than the mistakes you have made or the accomplishments you have accomplished. You are a child of God. In you, God has taken delight.

Start there. Start there because when you begin there you will have what you need to fulfill all righteousness. Grace will free you to understand your place, to admit your faults, to recognize that you are no different than anyone else, to stand in line with all other sinners. Grace will free you to tell the truth, to embrace your humanity, to claim the remarkable responsibility you have been given as a child of God. Marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit, you represent God to the world. Wow! And so do all those others who stand in line with you!