

Last One In is a Rotten Egg!

January 13, 2008

(Epiphany 1 - Year A)

Matthew 3: 3-17

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Back in the season of Advent, we heard the stories of John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Jesus in the wilderness.

John the Baptist baptizes sinners, sinners like you and like me, in the Jordan River, with a baptism of repentance from sins.

Yet, in today's Gospel, Jesus comes to John the Baptist to be baptized by John, rather than the other way around.

The question that has bothered scholars for centuries is this:

If Jesus was sinless, if Jesus never sinned, then why did he need to receive baptism from John the Baptist?

If we look carefully at the biblical text in the Gospel of Matthew, the writer of Matthew gives us the answer.

In that biblical text, John the Baptist doesn't want to baptize Jesus.

Yet Jesus insists, saying:

"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness."

I don't know about you, but to me, that answer is just about as clear as mud.

"To fulfill all righteousness."

What the heck does that mean?

"To fulfill all righteousness" just sounds like a bunch of church-y words to me.

Yet, to put it in different words,

Jesus is saying is that he wants to be baptized because he thinks that it is the right thing to do, the proper thing to do, to get down into the waters of baptism, with us.

As many of you know, Susan and I lead a session of Summer Camp

every summer at Camp Allen.
The camp session that we lead is for 3rd and 4th graders.

During camp, the campers go to the swimming pool at least once a day.
After the kids have gathered their towels and put on their bathing suits,
And after the camp site has been emptied of kids and counselors,
I will usually walk on down to the pool myself, to supervise and to be
there as a resource for the life guards, in case of an emergency.

Most of the time, I will just sit by the pool and read a book or talk to one
of the other camp directors.
The kids will occasionally talk to me or ask me to watch them do a
somersault under water.

Yet, on some days, I will get in the swimming pool with them.
And when I get in the water with them, I never become one of them, I
am always still the Session Director.
Yet, my relationship with the kids changes when I take off my shirt and
jump into the swimming pool with them.

When they see that I am jumping in the water, they scream out:
“Hey everybody, Papa Jeff’s getting in - let’s get him!”

And before I know it, I have a bunch of kids hanging all over me, trying
to dunk me under the water.
Kids who want me to throw them high up into the air,
Kids who want to swim,
Then who want to talk about life in their cabin,
About life in their home,
About life with their God.

My job description as Session Director at camp says nothing about
swimming with the campers.
In fact, I do not need to swim with campers at all.
Yet, sometimes I will jump in the water with them,
To fulfill all righteousness.
Because it is the right thing, to get in the water, together.

John the Baptist says to Jesus:
“You don’t need to be baptized.”

Yet, Jesus answers:

“It is proper to be baptized,
To fulfill all righteousness.”

Because it is the right thing, to get in the water, together.

Last year, a long-time member of this congregation (who is now deceased), Mary Jean Burton, was in rehab last February, and was unable to come to church on Ash Wednesday.

So, 2 days later, on the Friday after Ash Wednesday, I went to see Mary Jean in her room, to bring Ash Wednesday to her.

I brought my home communion kit with me, as well as ashes to place on her forehead.

I told Mary Jean that, even though it was Friday and even though Ash Wednesday had been 2 days before, we were just going to say that it was “Ash Friday” instead.

Together, we said the prayers in the Prayer Book for Ash Wednesday.

Then, as her priest, I got out my little container with dark, gray ashes in it.

I put my thumb into the ashes and put them on her forehead and said:

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Then, I did something a little unorthodox:

I asked Mary Jean to put ashes on my forehead, too.

At first, Mary Jean protested a bit and said:

“But, Jeff, why do I need to put ashes on you?”

However, I told her that it was okay - that I *wanted* her to impose ashes on me.

Then, I will never forget Mary Jean’s old, gnarled finger, pressing into those cold, dark ashes.

And leaning over in her chair, smudging them onto my forehead.

Nothing in The Book of Common Prayer says that lay people are to put
ashes on the forehead of their priest, 2 days after Ash Wednesday.
Yet, sometimes it is okay to break the rules,
To fulfill all righteousness.
Because it is the right thing to get in the water, together.

You see, it is time for us to get off our high horses and get wet in the
waters of baptism.
Because our preoccupation with rules and regulations,
Our hesitancy to take off our shirts and jump into the water,
Is a huge road block to the good news of Jesus Christ.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is more concerned about
people than religion.
The good news is that God has gotten off God's high horse, to jump into
the waters of baptism, with us.

Because in Jesus Christ, God has gotten off his high horse and become
God with us, in stinky straw at Bethlehem.
God has gotten off his high horse and become God with us, dying as a
death row inmate in Huntsville.
God has gotten off his high horse and become God with us, jumping into
the waters of the Jordan River for a baptism of repentance.

Why?
To fulfill all righteousness.
Because it is the right thing to get in the water, together.

Today, we will baptize Stella Lucia Raimondo.
The Son of the living God will get off his high horse and get into the
waters of baptism with her, to fulfill all righteousness.

The question is:
Do we have the courage to jump into those waters with Stella and with
Jesus?

Because getting in the water with Jesus and with Stella is not spelled out

in the Book of Common Prayer,
Getting in the water means that we will love God and love people, even
if that means breaking the rules sometimes,
Getting in the water means that we will swim with people we don't like
or agree with,
Getting in the water means that we will get wet and cold and our hair
messed up, and somebody might just see us vulnerable and half-
naked,
To fulfill all righteousness.

The waters of baptism are calling your name.
Dive into the death and resurrection of the God with us.
Last one in is a rotten egg!

Because it is right, and a good and joyful thing,
To get in the water, together.

AMEN.

© The Rev. Jeff W. Fisher, 2008