

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
First Sunday after Epiphany
January 13, 2008

Isaiah 42.1-9
Matthew 3.13-17

All In Proper Time

“But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented.” –Matthew 3.15

In the spring of 1521, the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther was in peril. He had spoken from his heart and his mind and created a storm within Roman Catholicism and the Holy Roman Empire. His refusal to recant his religious writings led to a bounty on his head. Some friends and supporters arranged for him to be “kidnapped” and taken to an undisclosed, safe, location. And so, at the Wartburg Castle he lived for a year in relative solitude, known only to the other people there as “Squire George.”

While he was at the Wartburg, Luther accomplished many things—not the least of which was translating the entire New Testament into everyday German. But it was also a period of great personal difficulty. He was tired and worn down from the ordeal of his trial at the Diet of Worms. He was suffering from physical symptoms probably related to stress and poor eating habits, but it was too risky to leave the castle to see a doctor. He lived with this from May until October, when a friend was able to smuggle in some laxatives.

But, mostly, it was a time of spiritual darkness. Legend has it that Luther threw an inkpot at the Devil who was struggling with him and that the ink stain can still be seen to this day. That legend is probably not factual. (Perhaps an invention of the Wartburg Tourist Bureau!) But it does capture nicely Luther’s mood. At night, he imagined that the birds crowing outside were the echoes of demons in his soul. He thought he heard the Devil cracking the walnuts from his table on the ceiling as he tried to sleep.

He wrote to a friend, “I can tell you in this idle solitude there are a thousand battles with Satan. It is much easier to fight against the incarnate Devil—that is against men—than against spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places....I am mightily displeasing to myself, perhaps because I am alone....Often I fall and am lifted again by God’s right hand.”

One thing kept Luther going throughout that dark period. Each day, he would scribble the words “I am baptized” on his desktop. By remembering his baptism, he would battle back despair. “I am baptized.” Everything Luther most believed was captured in those three little words. For him, and for us, baptism is the sign and seal of the unmerited grace of Jesus Christ.ⁱ

Each year, on the Sunday after Epiphany, we remember the baptism of Jesus. All of the Gospels contain a report of this eventⁱⁱ and the fact that John baptized Jesus is historical bedrock that has been questioned by only a few of the most skeptical historians.ⁱⁱⁱ It definitely happened, but it is up to the various gospel writers to help us understand what it means. This year it is Matthew’s turn. Matthew’s account is the only one that records a *conversation* between John the Baptist and Jesus at the time of the baptism. It’s a significant conversation, because the words we hear from Jesus here are the very first words he speaks. This scene introduces us to the adult Jesus for the first time. Right from the start, Jesus speaks with authority and takes charge of his own baptism:

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 do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. —Matthew 3.13-15

John is wise enough to understand that this is not the typical sinner coming out for baptism. Jesus is someone special. John proposes that they reverse roles. Jesus, not him, should do the baptizing in this case.

In a response that supports one of the major themes of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus does not suggest that John's perception is incorrect. He is, indeed, someone special. But righteousness requires that they "let it be so for now" and have Jesus baptized in the normal fashion. In Matthew's Gospel, righteousness means doing the revealed will of God. Matthew's first model of righteousness was Joseph, who was told in a dream to take Mary as his wife and name his child Jesus. Joseph didn't say a word. He just did it.

Sometimes righteousness requires that we live through things that we don't understand. It's a mark of faith to accept that God is with us even when we are confused or uncertain. John didn't think he should baptize someone as important as Jesus, but he went ahead and did as he was told—trusting that all would be revealed in due course. All in proper time the full truth would be known.

Martin Luther didn't want to hide out in a castle. He wanted to return to Wittenburg to face his critics and mobilize his supporters. But he accepted his time in hiding as a necessary part of God's will. When he did return, a year later, he was immensely more prepared and effective than he would have been without his time at the Wartburg.

Though none of us are biblical prophets or reformation heroes, we are no different in relation to God's unfolding will. Things happen in our lives that make us anxious and impatient. We want everything to go according to plan. But it doesn't. It can't—because that's not how God works. I remember when I arrived at my last church—I was about Curt's age, or even a couple of years younger. I had lots of ideas of what needed to be done in that church. It needed an elevator. It needed an associate pastor. The people there needed more and better ways of supporting each other in their daily struggles. Some changes happened quickly and easily. But most things took the painstaking work of many people and *lots* more time than I envisioned. But, somehow, each step we took prepared us for the next. Had we tried to do everything at once—as I so impatiently wanted—nothing would have worked well. But when

we faced each new challenge with faith—like John, doing what we felt called to do at the moment—then we began to make progress.

We weren't ready, at first, to hire more staff. But we were ready to begin sharing our joys and concerns out loud in worship. A similar change has happened here in our worship serves. As that congregation began to share its burdens, it became more aware of the ways in which it *needed* more staff to help people care for one another. One thing led to another, but it required patience and faith. Like Jesus says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Let it be so for now.

The same thing is true of our personal struggles. We all have known hard times of spiritual darkness—trouble at work, trouble at home, sickness and death all around. There are times when we lack focus and energy. Times when things don't seem to "work" the way they used to "work" in our lives. We want to be spared these times. We want them not to happen. But, if we are honest, most of our spiritual growth comes as a result of the hard times we must endure.

By submitting to baptism, Jesus unites himself with all of the uncertainties and anxieties of human existence. Jesus is God's son, but in baptism he becomes like us. As the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith puts it, he has "come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world..." In his baptism, Jesus left the calm of heavenly eternity and entered the cluttered and chaotic world of human time. When he came up from the waters of the Jordan, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God was made manifest. In that moment, everything changed for us. Heaven and earth, once parted through sin, were united in a new way in the person of Jesus.^{iv} This is good news for anxious hearts in a world full of paralyzing fears. On that day, Jesus became forever connected to us through the common baptism we share. That connection meant everything to Martin Luther in his lonely struggles. It can mean the same to us.

"I am baptized." Three little words. Thanks be to God.

Notes:

ⁱ See: Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), pages 56-58; Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), pages 149-152; F. Dean Lueking in *The Lectionary Commentary—The Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), pages 16-19.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 3.13-17, Mark 1.9-11, Luke 3.21-11. See, also, John 1.29-34, where Jesus' baptism is inferred rather than narrated.

ⁱⁱⁱ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, volume Eight* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), page 159.

^{iv} F. Dean Lueking, *ibid*, page 17.