

“To Fulfill All Righteousness”

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¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

I once heard a story about a little girl who paid a visit to the Beethoven House in Bonn, Germany, a museum that houses, among other things, his last grand piano, the one he used to compose some of his most enduring works. The little girl, who had been taking piano lessons herself, was old enough to recognize the significance of this artifact. After a few quiet moments, she turned to the museum guard standing nearby. “Sir,” she asked gently, “since no one else is in here, could I possibly play just a few bars?”

It was clearly against the rules, but the guard could not resist. He unhooked the velvet rope, let her take a seat on the bench, and listened as she haltingly played the introduction to Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” As she got up she said to the guard with a big smile, “I bet all the great pianists who have come in here want to play on that piano.”

As he put the velvet rope back in place, the guard shook his head. “No, ma’am,” he said. “They do come here, but none of them feel worthy to even touch it.”

That, I believe, is how John the Baptist must have felt when Jesus first met him at the Jordan River. John had become a religious celebrity in his own right. The crowds he was drawing just kept getting bigger and bigger, with people pouring out of Jerusalem to come hear him preach and teach. But when Jesus came forward from the crowd to ask John for the ritual purification with water that he was offering to everyone, John froze. The two had never met before, but John sensed immediately that he was in over his head. He could tell that he was in the presence of a different level of greatness, and he felt unworthy to do this thing that Jesus was asking him to do.

“You are the one who should be baptizing me,” John replied. “This does not feel right.”

But Jesus insisted. “*Let it be so now,*” Jesus replied, “*for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*” So John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. And, according to the gospels, this was the beginning of his true ministry... the ritual moment that elevated him to the status of Messiah. It was his anointing.

Some of you may have watched the coronation of King Charles back in 2023. For me, one of the most interesting moments of that highly ritualistic day came when attendants brought four large screens onto the chancel of Westminster Abbey. With precise choreography, they assembled them as four temporary walls, creating a square space near the altar. At the same time, other attendants removed the crimson, fur-lined velvet robe that Charles was wearing. The evidence of his worldly power was taken away, leaving him clad only in a simple white tunic and his Royal Naval trousers. He then walked behind the screens, where the Archbishop of Canterbury anointed Charles with oil and prayer. As the



whole world was watching, there was this private, intimate moment when, through a ritual anointing, a fallible, human being humbled himself before God to receive a much-needed blessing for the commission he was accepting, the awesome duty that would soon be his. On a day of public pomp and circumstance, it was a purely personal moment. No one heard the words that were uttered behind the screens. No one saw how it all went down. So no one knows what it was really like in there – no one except Charles and the Archbishop.

This was the kind of moment that Jesus and John had in the Jordan, except there were no screens. That would not have been proper for the moment. This could not be private and quiet, because that was not what was needed *“to fulfill all righteousness.”* No, for Jesus everyone needed see the heavens torn open and the Spirit’s dove descending. Everyone needed to hear the booming voice saying *“This is my Son... pay attention to him!”*

All that makes sense to me. It was a divine coronation... an anointing of a sovereign. But there is something about it that does not make sense... at least not at first. No offense to the Anglophiles in the room, but I know why Charles needed an anointing. Just like I know why Saul, David, Solomon, and every other human monarch has needed it. As human beings we are mortal, fallible, imperfect, and broken. We need all the help we can get. But why did Jesus need it? Why would one who was without blemish, without guilt, without sin need to be purified, need to have his sin washed away? Why would Jesus need an extra blessing by the Holy Spirit? John sensed this immediately. *“This guy does not need help from me. I need help from him.”* But Jesus still says this is the way it needs to be. His baptism, his anointing, is what is needed to fulfill all righteousness.

I think the key to the mystery is in the word *“fulfill.”* The evangelist Matthew loves that word, because as he saw it, Jesus was the fulfillment of all kinds of Old Testament prophecies and predictions. From birth in Bethlehem all the way up to riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday, Matthew ties all of these events to things the ancient prophets said about the Messiah. Matthew does not see coincidences; he sees things happening the way God always intended them to happen... things that absolutely **had** to happen so that God’s will and purpose *“might be fulfilled,”* so that things would be made full... made perfect... made complete.

In other words, Jesus did not need to be baptized... Jesus did not require a special anointing... but this is the way it had to be, because it would set the stage for everything that was to come. Jesus would do amazing things... world-changing things... but it had to begin with an act of humbling. In the Advent and Christmas season we talked about the humble beginnings of Jesus – born into a peasant family in a nowhere town... even born outdoors because no inn would have them. And now, at the beginning of his adult ministry, we see yet another affirmation of his humility. He subjects himself – willingly and purposely -- to the authority of John, a fallible human being who saw very clearly that he had no business touching Jesus’ sandals, let alone giving him a royal blessing, because this was the way God wanted to introduce Jesus to the world. Not as some flamboyant, self-absorbed king who couldn’t wait to grab hold of power, but as an agent of peace, hope, and love... someone who came not to bring condemnation and punishment, but grace and mercy. In his baptism, Jesus humbled himself.

He also initiated a pattern that would hold for the rest of his earthly life and ministry. He was not just going to tell people what to do to be righteous. He was going to show them. He would not just preach about turning the other cheek when we are struck, he is going to show us how to do that. He is not just going to tell us to love and pray for our enemies, he is

going to teach us by actually doing that, even when his own life was in danger. He was not just going to say that love is the most powerful thing in the world, he was going to prove it with his own life. So, in this critical early moment, Christ humbled himself, because that is the kind of king he was meant to be. That was the way it had to begin if things were to go the way he wanted them to... the way it had to be in order "to fulfill all righteousness."

So, Jesus did this for the integrity of his own ministry, but he also did it for John's. By lowering himself to John's level, Jesus elevated John to new and greater possibilities. Until his encounter with Jesus, the baptism John offered was about laws and rules. It sought justice that was more human than divine – a narrow kind of justice, a cold, stern, and unforgiving kind of justice that was focused on shame, retribution, and punishment. The kind of justice that yells, "You better repent or else!"

But when Jesus came up out of the water, John's view of the world changed forever. In an instant, grace meant something new, something bigger. Love was something new, something bigger. And I have to think in that moment John understood why Jesus humbled himself... why this was the way it had to be for love to win.

The noted scholar and Christian educator Rodger Nishioka tells a story about a boy named Kyle. His family had come to the church when Kyle was in fifth grade. They came every now and then, but weren't very active. So Rodger was surprised when, a few years later, Kyle jumped into the confirmation class with both feet. Kyle attended regularly, shared openly with the group, was enthusiastic at every event. When Pentecost came, Kyle was baptized and confirmed. It was a joyful day in the church.

And then, Rodger said, it pretty much ended. The family basically disappeared. "That is when I knew we had done something wrong," Rodger said. When he called on the family to make sure everything was OK, they seemed surprised to hear from him. "Oh," Kyle's mother said. "I guess I just thought that Kyle was all done. I mean, he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn't he done?"¹

Rodger Nishioka does not tell that story to shame Kyle or his family or anyone else. He tells it emphasize a key lesson from the baptism of Christ. In the gospels, Christ's baptism is not the culmination of his ministry; it is the beginning. His anointing is not the crowning achievement – it is a heavenly commission for a life of faithfulness and service.

Christ did not need the water or the blessing, but we do. We do need to be lifted up. We do need to be cleaned off. We do need to be set on the right path and given an example of what a righteous life really looks like. So Christ humbled himself so that we might see how a life of faith and service begins. And, with every step he took after that beginning, we see how that kind of life is actually lived.

So we are not done. In the water of our own baptisms, we were marked by heaven and commissioned for service, and there is no part of our lives that is not claimed by that water. Just like a king at a coronation, all the worldly things that we think define us -- wealth, status, jobs, clothes, houses -- all the trappings of human life and human pride... all that is taken off and set aside. Behind the sacred screen of your baptism, it's just Christ and us. And after that moment, everything we do, everything we are is given a sacred duty to show the world what faith looks like... what love looks like... what sacrifice looks like... what a life

¹ Rodger Nishioka. "Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), pp. 236-238.

well-lived looks like. So, we are not done. In fact, we have a lot of work to do. That is not only how it is. That is how it has to be to fulfill all righteousness.

Amen.