

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Fulfillment”

Matthew 3: 13-17

January 9, 2005

Brandt and I were driving home in his truck the other day and I got to listen to some of his music... In my truck it's pretty much NPR or golden oldies. But, alas... he hasn't discovered the wonder of James Taylor or the Beach Boys or ZZ Top.

He pulled out a CD from some strange band called Tool, I think. (Shouldn't that be “The Tool,” like “The Beatles,” “The Allman Brothers?”) **“Listen to this,”** he said.

It was interesting. What he played for me was a cut where the song begins with someone reading from a book. I'd never read the book... but the lines were familiar. Here are a few:

“Think for yourself... question authority.”

“The authorities... political, religious, educational... have attempted to give us comfort by giving us order, rules, regulations... forming us with their view of reality.”

“To think for yourself, you must question authority.”

The lines were familiar because I'd said them along the way. All of us from the '60s said them... together and in unison... of course. We celebrated the great freedom of the individual to think and be autonomous.

And it wasn't just in our generation but in our genes...

We were Americans... westerners.

We had pioneer spirit in our blood and brains.

And most of us were Protestants and Protestants protest... that's the whole point, right?

I spent lots of years protesting and **“thinking for myself.”**

And at one level, that's a very good thing. To reflect and evaluate... to internalize authority rather than allowing it to remain “out there” in code or institution or symbol or someone.

It's frustrating to bump up against closed-mindedness in folks... and that haven't gotten past, **“Well... this is what my parents believed”** or **“The preacher says.”**

“Is your faith your own?” That's a question we like to ask. We talk about having a personal relationship to God... and we look down at anything that seems to be centered in appearances and “empty ritual.”

And there's a Jesus we like to back all that up with... a Jesus that we see clearly in scripture running head on into authority and tradition. He calls the traditionalists **“whitewashed tombs full of dead men's bones.”**

He breaks the Sabbath rules and sometimes seems to do so just to tick the authorities off.

John, especially, writes Jesus this way. Right off the bat, John tells the story of the cleansing of the temple. He flies into a rage and into the temple... knocking over the tables and yelling at those who are taking advantage of people in the name of God... and turning **“his father's holy house into Wall Street chaos.”**

We like that Jesus, don't we? The one who is outside and different... unconventional... disorienting everything and everybody. Unpredictable... a radical any hippy could love. Certainly a biblical picture ... of one “questioning authority.”

But there's another picture... the one Matthew paints in our reading for today. It's not a radical Jesus, confronting the guys in black hats. It's a very humble Jesus... who makes his way to the Jordan River and submits himself to John and to God, in the process.

He'd been up in Galilee for all his adult life, as far as we know. Nothing public... I wish we knew something of that. Because most of us have a picture of those years that cannot be if we take the incarnation seriously.

We picture Jesus in some carpenter shop, just sort of biding his time. He makes another end table... carves out another canoe... and looks out the window longing for the day he gets the green light from God.

Not so... if he's a human being. He's living and learning... discovering, becoming... Failing and learning from it. Wrestling with what he thinks. Learning how to know God.

If Jesus gets a leg up on us...
the whole deal's a sham.
God empties himself.

And in the person of Jesus, is down in Galilee... becoming... And somewhere the calling becomes clear or clear enough. And this Jewish man... teacher... gets the green light.

What's he gonna do first? I mean, Matthew's been telling us this amazing and miraculous story about his birth... God with us... Jesus, here to save us from our sins. And he's been spared in a miraculous way. And now he's all grown up... what's first on the agenda?

In John... there's this amazing and flashy miracle. A bunch of H₂O gets transformed into vintage Merlot. That's what's first... **"Done,"** John says, **"to reveal God's glory."**

What's first in Matthew? This story we just heard. Jesus, having gotten the green light, says **"what now?"** And the answer he hears is, **"Go see John."**

So, the Savior walks down to Judea... it's a long walk, you know? It's like saying, **"Jesus came from Waco to Austin to be baptized."**

That's what he's doing there. It's not... "Well, as long as I'm in the area, think I'll go pay my respects to the front runner." No... this why he made the trip... to be baptized.

That's what happens first; Jesus humbly wades out up to his hips in the Jordan River.

Mark and Luke report that he was baptized and leave it at that... but Matthew gives us something more. We hear John the Baptist protesting, **"Me baptize you? What's up with that? I don't think so. It ought to be the other way around."**

Then Jesus speaks... these are the first words Matthew gives us. **"Let it be... this is the way to fulfill all righteousness."**

That word fulfill is important in this gospel. Matthew uses some form of the word twenty six times... he likes to talk about Jesus fulfilling some prophecy, but here that doesn't seem to be what is fulfilled.

Jesus does this to fulfill all righteousness, and righteousness, simply put, is what God requires. In other words, he's doing what God requires of him. This is an act of submission; it is an act of obedience to the will of God. And this is the way Jesus begins his ministry. It is an event that sets the tone.

Here, he seems to be saying, **"I'm doing this because God told me to... this is what God wants."** His Son, the One who has come to take upon himself the wounds of the world... identifying himself with sinners here at the Jordan... humbly accepting this sacrament of self-denial and spiritual death and rebirth.

Jesus got the green light and he asked, **“Now what? How am I to be obedient to God?”** He heard... and he obeyed... Like Matthew is saying by the way he arranges his gospel and tells this story, **“Let’s get this straight from the beginning, Jesus is here to do the will of God.”**

Jesus doesn’t start out “thinking for himself.” He doesn’t start out with a list of demands or expectations that he wants filled. He’s no prima donna. He’s not going to hold out for a better messianic deal because this one’s hard and demanding and frightening. He begins in humility... in submission, in a kind of letting go. **“Let it be.”**

He goes to see John and he stands in line, waiting his turn.

He wades into the water, right next to real live sinners like you and me.

He puts himself in John’s hands and leans back into the water
because that is what God wants him to do.

He is obedient to God.

“What does God want from me?” That is the question that drives Jesus.

And it always will be for Jesus. Here at the beginning it is, and then we sneak a peak at the end of the story and we hear him saying in the Garden the night before he dies, **“God, I don’t want to do this, take this cup from me. I don’t want this.”** Notice there are two wills, what Jesus wants and what God wants. **“I wish this could happen a different way. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.”**

His will bound to the will of God.

It’s the same commitment he made at the Jordan. The “proper” thing, the right thing, is to fulfill God’s desire... to do God’s will.

Does that sound heavy to you?

Do the proper thing?

Do the right thing? Obey?

Do God’s will, even if it’s different from your own?

Sort of bumps into, at the very least, a lot of our instincts, huh? Jesus lives a radical life... it is radically submissive to what God wants from him. And the great paradox is that, in that, he finds his freedom... As do we.

You know what I think... I think no one thinks for herself or himself. There are no real “free spirits.” Autonomy is a great illusion. There are no spiritual Lone Rangers... no such thing as a priest unto herself.

The question is never **“am I going to submit?”**... you are... you will. Don’t ask that question. Ask these questions instead...

To whom or to what will I submit?

And, will I be conscious of it?

Will I be intentional about it?

There will be many things... more than happy to step up to the plate of your life to control you and your thinking and your behavior.

Impulses and passions of all kinds...

Movements in the culture.

People in your life...

There will be a never-ending line at your heart’s door of those ready to call your shots. And, know this, the most powerful among them will convince you that you are autonomous.... In control. You will be unconsciously submitted.... Asleep and dying a slow death... and you won’t know it.

You'll be driven by an ego, controlled by the culture or by your need to please or succeed or rebel...

I've been reading Thomas Merton's life story... this profoundly influential mystic, monk in the last century. As a young person, his life was a mess... just a terrible, terrible mess.

He lived a self-willed, self-absorbed, pleasure-driven existence... And it spiraled into misery and slavery. He was morally bankrupt and spiritually dead. And the great irony was that at the end of all his free-living, his life came to be ruled by fear.

"Fear" he wrote, "is inseparable from pride and lust. They may hide it for a time: but it is the reverse of the coin. The coin had turned over and I was looking at the other side: the eagle that was to eat out my insides for a year or so... it was humiliating, this strange wariness that accompanied all my actions... It was a humiliation I had deserved more than I knew. There was more justice in it than I could understand. I had refused to pay any attention to the moral laws upon which all our vitality and sanity depend: and so now I was reduced to the condition of a fearful silly person." He was a slave.

Jesus knows something...

he understands...

he models it.

Freedom is found in our obedience to the One who made us. Now, I know... Life is only known in submission to what is eternally and ultimately loving. Knowing what that means and how to do it isn't easy. I know that sometimes it seems we just have to go into "a far country."

Some authorities need to be rejected or replaced.

Some communities left... interpretations changed.

The Church and its Tradition haven't always been perfect.

Sometimes we stand alone as Jesus did... but always in submission to the Divine. And know that God will always send you a gift... a person, a community, the Tradition, a path. In your obedience to God's will, God will not leave you alone. God is engaged with you and if you are authentically following... you'll know.

The end of this story is really important. Jesus is standing there dripping wet and the heavens open and God speaks, **"This is my son... I love him... I'm pleased with him."** I don't think his behavior changed his Father's heart... nor will ours.

But I do think it's important that he knew His Father's heart here. He heard the blessing here in the middle of the Jordan in the middle of God's will. Perhaps what is true for us is that we're more likely to know God's heart when we're in God's will.

God's love is never withdrawn... we just have limited capacity to know it, living as if we don't care for it.

And isn't that what we're after, to have the heavens open occasionally and know in our heart of hearts that we belong to God, that we're loved? And maybe even to hear someplace inside the voice of God saying to us, **"This is my son. I love him. This is my daughter. I love her. In whom I'm well-pleased."** Isn't that what you want?