

Living in God's Pleasure

1/8/17

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. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Matthew 3: 13-17

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all of our hearts
Be acceptable in thine sight
O God our Rock and our Redeemer.
Amen.

For John the baptist, the act of baptism was an outward act of cleansing which pointed to the need for an inner purification. Just as in a normal bath we wash ourselves to remove the dirt that has accumulated on the outside of our bodies--in John's baptism we acknowledge that dirt accumulates on the inside as well.

The point here is that for John, baptism was primarily an act of repentance--and therefore, preparation--it was what you do to get ready to meet the coming Messiah. You acknowledge your sin--and try to do something about it.

Look at it this way: Just like we would clean ourselves up before going out to meet friends--in John's baptism we clean ourselves up to meet God's Son. It's really very simple--nobody wants to stink when they go out in public.

John points out that if there is a stink--it comes not merely from the outside, but from the inside as well. In fact, if you want to extend the metaphor--(not to mention the boundaries of good taste)--you could say that sin is inner BO. In John's baptism we acknowledge that our sin stinks to high heaven--and also that something must be done about it if we are to actually meet our God in the Messiah.

Now, here's the dilemma in John's baptism: If we are offensive to God because of a brokenness on the inside--and it is this offensiveness which cuts us off from God in his Infinite Goodness--no amount of outer washing is ever going to make a difference. If you have eaten raw garlic and then take a shower--in a half hour you're going to smell like garlic again. The stink now emanates from within.

So how are we to meet our Savior when all our cleansing efforts amount to dousing our outer selves with perfume to cover up our inner offensiveness? How are we to approach the one who can heal us--if it is our very need for healing which keeps us apart?

This, in essence, is why Jesus needed to be baptized by John. By entering into the baptismal water, Jesus completes the outer act of John's baptism. No longer does it remain merely an act of preparation--but becomes also an act of inner fulfillment.

In John's baptism we prepare to meet our Savior--in Jesus' baptism--we actually meet him in the water. Why? Because he's there--he's wading in the same pool that we are.

Maybe a better way to put it is to say that Jesus meets us at the very heart of our offensiveness. In entering into the baptismal waters, polluted by our brokenness, he does not turn away in disgust --but embraces us--and in embracing us--takes away our offensiveness. We are made clean--from the inside out.

Now, I have to tell you I have been purposefully using the most graphic language I could come up with to describe sin. The metaphor of sin as an offensive odor I think strikes at the heart of our actual experience of sin--though I don't think we often acknowledge it.

We are ashamed of our failings, our imperfections, our failures. And the curious thing about shame is that it cuts far deeper than we often realize--in fact, it ties into such deep deep fears and feelings that we very often refuse to even acknowledge it. Shame is such a frightening experience that we will often do almost anything to refuse to actually feel it. We live in denial.

This is where the rubber really hits the pavement on sin. The sins we find it easy to confess are the ones we most likely don't take too seriously. It's the sense of shame--that murky place within ourselves that we don't want to enter into--the places in ourselves we don't want to go--the patterns of behavior that we know are destructive but before which we feel helpless--impotent--that's where sin remains a vital reality--that's where sin becomes more than a word--that's where sin sucks our vitality and reduces us to mere slaves and victims and cowards and sad shadows of who we are created to be.

But hear the Good News: When Jesus rose from the baptismal waters, he saw the heavens opened to him and the Holy Spirit like a dove descend upon him--and there was a voice from heaven: "This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

In descending into the baptismal pool Jesus descended into the depths of our sin--and in rising up from the baptismal pool and receiving himself, the pleasure of God, the heavens were opened to us as well. The startling good news is that despite our stink, despite our sin, despite our shame--it is now possible, through the Beloved Son, to live in God's pleasure.

Friends, hear the Good News. In Jesus Christ, we are made clean. Amen.