Sermon for Matthew 3:13-17 – The Baptism of Our Lord

Sermon in a Sentence: Just as it was important to Jesus for John the Baptist to be faithful to his calling, so it is important to Jesus that we be faithful to ours.

Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized, but John protested, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” Imagine how John felt. John was a good man carrying out an important ministry, but who was he to be baptizing Jesus!

It reminds me of something that took place when my friend Steve was young in ministry. Steve was serving as the chaplain for a small hospital. The pastor of a neighboring church had a heart attack, and they brought him to Steve’s hospital. Steve had not found it difficult to visit other patients, but he found it difficult to visit this pastor. It had nothing to do with the other pastor – he was a fine man. It had to do with Steve! Steve felt he could visit the other patients, and they may or may not have known if he was saying the right thing. But this neighboring pastor might know. With that thought in mind, Steve was too insecure to really connect with the pastor.

The irony, of course, was the pastor was struggling with his own mortality and his future. After the pastor had been there a couple of days, the pastor told Steve what he had experienced during his first night in the hospital. The pastor had been afraid to go to sleep, because he didn’t think he would wake up. God bless that man. What a feeling that must have been.

This pastor didn’t need the polished prayers of a professional. The pastor just needed a Christian brother to walk with him through the valley. Through the years Steve has sometimes mentioned this story and wished he could go back in time to take that journey with that pastor. Steve knows now that he wouldn’t need to say much. Just listen. Offer a prayer. Most of all, just be there with him.

People in other professions experience the same kind of insecurity. I once read a book written by a surgeon. He told of the first time he held a scalpel against human flesh. He was too timid, and failed to break through the skin. The supervising surgeon shouted at him. Overcompensating, the young doctor cut too deeply. He feared that he had killed the patient, but the patient survived the surgery. When I read that story, I thought it was a wonder that doctor survived the training.

John the Baptist must have felt those same insecurities when Jesus came to him for baptism. Until Jesus arrived on the scene, John was doing great things. He was preaching up a storm, and people were coming to the desert in droves to hear him! He told people to repent, and they repented! He told people to confess their sins, and they confessed! He told them to be baptized, and they
submitted themselves to be baptized! John the Baptist was Israel’s first prophet in four hundred years, and the people could hardly get enough of him.

Then Jesus came for baptism, and John suddenly turned timid. Our text says, “John would have hindered him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?’” John had spoken with great authority in his preaching, but when Jesus presented himself to be baptized, John was faced with real authority – the authority of the Son of God – and John scarcely knew what to do. His instinct was to do nothing! He wanted to stop the action! He wanted to hide! “I can’t baptize YOU, Jesus! Please don’t ask me! I’m not worthy!”

But Jesus answered, "Allow it now, for this is the fitting way for us to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). What did that mean? I’m not sure that I fully understand, but we know this much: Jesus felt called to be baptized, and came to John to obey that call.

Jesus didn’t need much from John. He just needed John to baptize him. John knew how to do that. He had been baptizing people by the dozens – by the hundreds. But when Jesus came for baptism, John suddenly balked. It wasn’t that he had anything against Jesus – quite the contrary. John just didn’t feel worthy to baptize Jesus. He had recognized from the beginning that Jesus was the Son of God.

If I had been in John’s shoes, I would have felt unworthy too. If Jesus were to come to my office and ask to be baptized, I would think, “You’ve gotta be kidding!” Like John, I would say, “You don’t need me! I need you! Won’t you baptize me?”

But Jesus needed John to be faithful to John’s calling so that Jesus could be faithful to Jesus’s calling. He didn’t need John to be perfect. He didn’t need John to be better than John was. Jesus didn’t need John to be anything other than faithful. Jesus just needed John to baptize him.

Listen once again to Jesus’ words. He said, "This is the fitting way for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Did you hear that word? Jesus did not say, “It is fitting for me.” He said, “It is fitting for us.” In other words, Jesus saw John as his partner in ministry. Jesus knew it was important for him to do what God had called him to do – to be baptized – but he needed John to be faithful too, so that he could be baptized. It was important for Jesus to submit himself to John for baptism, but it was also important for John to put aside his misgivings so that John could baptize Jesus.

John was faithful. Matthew doesn’t describe the baptism itself, but Matthew does describe the results:
“Jesus, when he was baptized,
went up directly from the water:
and behold, the heavens were opened to him.

He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming on him.

Behold, a voice out of the heavens said,
‘This is my beloved Son,
with whom I am well pleased” (vv.16-17).

Wouldn’t that be something! Wouldn’t it be wonderful to do a small service for God – and to see the heavens open up – and to hear God’s voice of approval! That didn’t happen because John was great. It happened because John was faithful! John did what God had called him to do, and God took it from there!

There’s a message in that for us. God has called us to do his work and to be his people. He has called some of us to preach, and he has called others of us to keep the building clean. He has called some of us to sing in the choir, and he has called others of us to print the bulletins. He has called some of us to lead fund-raising campaigns, and he has called others of us to teach the three-year-olds.

There is one constant in all of that. The constant is this: God has called us TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE CALLING TO WHICH WE HAVE BEEN CALLED – whether that calling be great or small – whether we feel like it or not – whether we feel worthy or not. If we are faithful to the calling to which we have been called, great things will happen!

We might see them and we might not – but they will happen.
We might see the heavens open, and we might not – but good things will happen.
We might hear the voice of God, and we might not – but we can be assured that God will take our small efforts and turn them to gold.
By the grace of God, if we are faithful, great things will happen. They might happen immediately or they might happen two generations later. They might happen during our lifetimes, or they might happen a decade after we die – but by the grace of God, if we are faithful to the calling to which God has called us, great things will happen.
Let me ask you to do something – please make a conscious effort to remember this point: **If we are faithful to the calling to which God has called us, God will insure that great things happen.** That will be true whether our calling is something small or something great. If we are faithful, God will take care of the rest.

Let me tell you why I ask you to remember that. It's important to remember to be faithful so that we don't become discouraged – so that we don’t say, “The church isn’t growing” – so that we don’t say, “We don’t have enough money.” If we remember that we are acting by God’s power – on God’s timetable – God will help us to lift our eyes from the dirt at our feet so that we might be able to see the trees and the skies above us.

That’s what God wants! God wants us to believe – to hope – to celebrate! God wants us to be filled with joy!

You might ask, “How can I be joyful? Haven’t you read the newspaper lately! Aren’t you aware of all the terrible things that are happening around the world! Don’t you know that our politicians can’t get it together! Don’t you realize that everything is unraveling!

Yes, I'm aware of all those things. But I'm aware of another, even more important thing. It's this: From beginning to end, the Bible acknowledges that life is seldom easy – but it gives example after example after example of God’s power overcoming crushing odds.

- When little David acted in faith, he was able to slay the giant Goliath.
- When Gideon acted in faith, he and his little band of three hundred men were able to defeat the whole Midianite army.
- When Jesus was faithful, he died on a cross – but God raised him from the dead three days later.
- When Paul and Silas were faithful, they were arrested for preaching the Gospel – but two things happened. First of all, Paul and Silas didn’t mope and despair. While in prison, they sang hymns of praise to God. Secondly, God sent an earthquake that freed them from their prison cell (Acts 16).

And so on and so forth! God is in charge, and God will win! That’s the promise of scripture. And we are on God’s team. Each of us is important to the victory, whether God calls us to throw a touchdown pass or to carry water to the rest of the team. All we need to do is to be faithful to the call to which God has called us. God will take care of the rest.
John the Baptist almost turned Jesus down. He almost refused to baptize Jesus. He almost became unfaithful to his calling. I don’t know what would have happened if John had been unfaithful, but I have the sense that the world would have lost a great moment. But John was faithful – and he saw the heavens open – and he heard the voice of God say, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (v. 17).

Let us listen for our calling. Let us not be afraid if God calls us to do something great. Let us not be ashamed if God calls us to do something small. Let us be faithful – and let us prepare ourselves to see the heavens opened – and God’s voice saying, “Well done!”

Peace friends,

Chuck