

“He Would Have Prevented Him”

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of the Lord

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A number of years ago, back when our family lived in Dallas and our boys were much younger, my parents came to visit us from Michigan. And the night that Grandma and Grandpa arrived, wouldn't you know it, we had a plumbing problem.

There were two bathrooms in the house.  
And one of them was out of order.

Well, we called the plumbers.  
They couldn't make it that night.  
Or the next day.  
Or the day after that.  
It was three days before the plumbing problem was fixed.

And for those three days, you know what happened, right?  
Everyone in the house had to share THE SAME BATHROOM.

Anyone else here ever had to share one bathroom with all the other members of your family before?

My father said it reminded him of his days growing up on a farm in Iowa.

They only had one bathtub in the house, he said.  
No indoor plumbing.  
Which meant in order to take a bath, you would heat the water first...and then pour it into the tub.

Take a pot of water, heat it, pour it into the tub.  
Take another pot of water, heat it, pour it into the tub.

Good grief, I said to my dad...you did that every day?  
 Oh no, he said. It took a long time to get enough water in the tub.  
 We only heated water for a bath ONCE A WEEK.

You only took a bath once a week? On the farm?  
 That wasn't the worst part, he said.  
 The worst part was that you didn't pour NEW hot water into the  
 tub every time someone got into the tub.

The tub was filled ONCE.  
 And my father had four siblings.  
 Which meant one sibling got in the water.  
 Washed themselves. Got out of the water.  
 Another sibling got in. Washed themselves. Got out.

My dad said there was a big difference between being the FIRST  
 ONE in the tub and the LAST ONE in the tub.

Can you imagine being the last one?  
 Looking at the water, and going...**I don't want to do this!!**

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Now, when my dad told us that story, I heard it as a "be grateful  
 for what you've got, at least the bathroom we're using has indoor  
 plumbing" kind of story.

All these years later, I wonder if it's also a BAPTISM story.

Here's what I mean.

In our text for today, Jesus shows up at the Jordan to be baptized  
 by John. And what's the first thing that goes through John's mind?

## **I don't want to do this!**

You heard the way Matthew describes the scene:

*John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

In other words, he resists Jesus.

Questions Jesus.

Is reluctant to do what Jesus is asking him to do.

I hope you didn't miss that part.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who includes that part.

In Mark and Luke, when Jesus comes for his baptism, he meets no resistance.

But in the Gospel of Matthew...Jesus meets RESISTANCE!

Not from the Pharisees.

Not from the Sadducees.

It comes from John.

Look, all the Gospels are clear:

John knew that Jesus ranked ahead of him, that Jesus had a higher calling than him.

John says that he came to prepare the way for the One who IS the way:

"I must decrease so that he can increase."

That's what John the Baptist says in the Gospel of John.

But not in the Gospel of Matthew.

In some ways, this may be the most honest rendering of what happened that day at the Jordan long ago.

Because I don't think John is the only one who has ever responded to Jesus with a little resistance.

Do you know anything about responding that way?

About resisting Jesus?

Doubting Jesus?

Not being able to wrap your mind around what Jesus is asking of you? Or understanding quite clearly what Jesus wants you to do...and you simply don't want to do it?

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I know this may sound like a strange approach to our text.

After all, today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

And when I'm teaching a Baptism Class here at Westminster, I write a word on the dry erase board and tell the class that if there's any one thing I want them to remember when they leave that class, any one thing that baptism is about, is this word.

Do you know what that word is?

Grace.

Not RESISTANCE.

Baptism is about the grace of God.

How that grace is there for us before we ever recognize it, how that grace claims us and contains us and calls us, giving us new life in Jesus Christ and promising to never let us go.

That's what baptism is about.

No escaping God's grace.

And it's true.

But there's another side to that grace, a side that I never really talk about in the class.

What's that side?

How there's always a part of God's grace that we want nothing to do with. A part that disgusts us, a part that scares us.

It was Flannery O' Connor who wrote:

"All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."<sup>1</sup>

The late theologian Walter Wink tells the story of a couple of peacemakers who visited a group of Christians from Poland, ten years after the end of WWII.

"Would you be willing to meet with other Christians from West Germany?" the peacemakers asked. "They want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war. They want to begin to build a new relationship."

At first there was silence.

Then one of the Polish Christians spoke.

"What you are asking is impossible. Each stone in Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive!"

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald, New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1979.

Before the peacemakers departed, however, the entire group said the Lord's Prayer together. When they reached the words "forgive us our sins as we forgive..."

There was a pause.  
Tension swelled in the room.

The Polish Christian who had spoken so vehemently said, "I must say yes to you. I could no more pray the Our Father, I could no longer call myself Christian, if I refuse to forgive. Humanly speaking, I cannot do it...but God will give us...strength to do it!"<sup>2</sup>

Eighteen months later the Polish Christians and West German Christians met together in Vienna, and they established relationships, friendships that lasted for decades. They were amazed at what the grace of God could do. But that amazement came...AFTER the cost of the grace was recognized.

After the group from Poland resisted!

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Do you see what we're talking about here?

Not just grace as a warm and beautiful thing, but God's grace as an OFFENSIVE thing. As something we will, at different times in our lives, resist...

Just look at what happens later in the Gospel of Matthew.

Do you remember the discussion that Peter and Jesus had?  
16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew?

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, as told by Philip Yancey in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

I say discussion...it wasn't a discussion.  
It was a fight!

Jesus tells his disciples that he has to travel to Jerusalem, and there he will undergo great suffering, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Matthew writes that at that moment, Peter “took him aside, and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’”

In other words: RESISTANCE.

Peter resists the grace that has entered his life and what that grace will cost him. What the grace of God is calling his Teacher, his Rabbi...to do.

But what's truly fascinating is how Jesus responds to Peter.  
Do you recall what Jesus does at that moment?

Did he approach Peter in his most pastoral tone, and put his arm around Peter's shoulder, and take the next hour explaining to Peter why he really had to go to Jerusalem and be killed, because it would all be ok in the end?

No.

Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me...”

Stumbling block...that's a gentle way to translate the Greek.  
The Greek word there is “skandalon”...  
You are a scandal...an offense to me!

Why would Jesus respond that way?

I think Peter was getting to Jesus.  
Tempting Jesus.

I think there was a part of Jesus that liked what Peter had to say.  
A part of Jesus that wanted to resist going to Jerusalem!  
A part of Jesus that wanted to say no to the way that God was  
calling him to go.

We hear it again on the last night of his life:  
“Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...”

I don't know about you, but it gives me comfort to know that  
Jesus, even Jesus, had some RESISTANCE in him to what his baptism  
was all about.

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Of course, Baptism of the Lord Sunday is not just about Jesus'  
baptism.

It's about yours and mine as well.

How many of you brought your iPhones with you?  
How many of you turned your iPhone off?  
Did you bring, this morning, any resistance with you?  
How many of you remembered to turn that resistance off?

I know I bring resistance to God's grace with me into this pulpit  
every Sunday. Just consider the events in Minneapolis this past week.

On the one hand, I know that we have a politically diverse  
congregation, and not everyone in this room will see what happened in  
Minneapolis the same way, through the same lens. Some will say that  
means we should just be quiet about it.



But I think the instinct to stay quiet—is something we need to resist.

Because Renee Good should NOT have been shot.

And what's saddening, maddening, disturbing is the way in which so many people these days are coming to accept VIOLENCE as the best approach to change our country's ways.

We saw it with the attack on the nation's capital five years ago.

We saw it with the killing of Renee Good last week.

We saw it with the killing of Charlie Kirk last September.

We saw it with the killing of **Yaron Lischinsky** and **Sarah Lynn Milgrim**, outside the Israeli embassy last May...

We even saw it here in Greenville, with the shooting of a police officer last night.

Violence, and the intentional disregard for the preciousness of every human life, is ANATHEMA to what the baptism of Jesus is all about.

And the Christian response that violence cannot be silence.

Part of our baptismal calling, our responsibility to the grace we have received, is to have conversations that build relationships across our divides...even conversations we might be inclined to resist.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote some 60 years ago:

“There is no easy way to create a world where men and women can live together...But if such a world is created in our lifetime, it will be

done...by rejecting... racism, materialism and violence...and especially by working toward a world of brotherhood, cooperation and peace.”<sup>3</sup>

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I’m reminded how, shortly after the death of Nelson Mandela, the rock star Bono wrote a tribute in *Time* magazine. Bono says that one of Mandela’s great gifts was his ability to build bridges with all kinds of people.

Bono recalls how Mandela once told him about Margaret Thatcher. How “the Iron Lady, who was famously frugal,” had personally donated £20,000 to his foundation.

“How did you do that?” Bono gasped.

“I asked,” Mandela said with a laugh.

“You’ll never get what you want if you don’t ask.”

Then Mandela lowered his voice conspiratorially and said to Bono that her donation had nauseated some of his [Mandela’s] cohorts.

“Didn’t she try to squash our movement?” they complained.

And Mandela responded:

“Didn’t De Klerk crush our people like flies?

And I’m having tea with him next week ....”

“Mandela lived a life without sanctimony,” Bono wrote, “[which] helped him turn former foes into friends.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” found in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, New York: HarperCollins, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> “Bono Honors the Man Who Could Not Cry,” by Bono, *Time*, December 5, 2013.

Which brings us back to the baptism of Jesus.

Did it ever occur to you that when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River long ago...he was baptized with friend and foe alike?

According to Matthew, Pharisees came to be baptized.

John called them “a brood of vipers.”

Jesus said to John, “Baptize me, just like you baptized those Pharisees.

According to Luke, tax collectors and soldiers came to be baptized.

Jesus said to John, “Baptize me, just like you baptized those Roman soldiers over there.”

In the same water...

It means that Jesus shared the same water,  
the same Jordan River water,  
as absolutely anyone...

Are you and I willing to share that water too?

I think the question before us today, the question that a part of me just wants to brush off and resist—is this:

What responsibility do WE have to bridge divides, to have conversations that are hard, but could also build relationships, as a response to the reckless use of violence?

What responsibility does the water we received at our baptisms...  
place on you and on me?

Amen.