

The Baptism of Our Lord, A ✕ D 2011

Matthew 3:13-17

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 You'll never be good enough. Period. The biggest theological fallacy in the minds of quasi-religious Americans is the belief that you can make yourself good enough to earn God's favor. Accusations of hypocrisy are regularly leveled against church-going Christians because of this deep-seated false belief. If we can make ourselves good enough, they suppose, then any evidence of sin in the lives of people who go to church is proof that you don't need to go to church to be good enough. That's vain, shallow thinking, attempting to rationalize lazy Sunday mornings and persistence in sin, while rejecting the gifts God offers.

2 When you encounter John the Baptist in today's Gospel reading, he's been spending his time in the verses immediately preceding today's pericope blasting away at sinners. Pharisees, tax collectors, soldiers, King Herod, and everyone in-between were objects of John's fierce Law preaching. Repent; the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. And many of the people responded by being baptized by John in the Jordan and by confessing their sins. And then Jesus came to John for this baptism for sinners.

3 John is understandably confused. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" You are the Savior from sin, why would You submit to a baptism for sinners? You are the One coming after me, the One whose sandals I am not worthy to touch, the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, the One who comes with winnowing fork in hand to clear the threshing floor and to burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire, and do You come to me to be baptized in the Jordan? You are the Christ, the long-awaited Savior of Israel, the One to judge the just and the wicked, and do You come to submit to a baptism for the wicked? You are the Lord, whose very presence caused me to worship while I was in my mother Elizabeth's womb, and You—worthy of the worship of everyone here—won't permit me to bow down in worship but implore me to baptize You? You are He whose name means "He saves His people from their sins," and do you come to be saved from sins?

4 "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," answered Jesus. John's thinking was much like our thoughts naturally incline. Good people get good things; bad people bad things. God wants you to be good, so if you're good enough, he'll reward you with His grace and mercy. Those are the natural thoughts of your brain. But they're wrong. So also John assumed that the Savior would come to call people up to Him, that He would save them from their sins by summoning them higher, out of the mire of their sins, not that He would descend into the very waters where sinners were being baptized. What hypocrisy, it seems.

5 Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus' Baptism inaugurates the three years of His earthly ministry. His work began when He took human flesh in the Virgin's womb nine months before His birth. It continues as He was born and later circumcised and given the name which means "He saves His people from their sins." Jesus fulfills all righteousness. What He began at His baptism He finished when baptized with the wrath of God on the cross. There, He declared that what began in the murky waters of the slow

moving Jordan River was completed with the river of water and blood from His pierced side: It is finished. Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness.

6 All righteousness: fulfilled in Jesus. When he stood in the waters of the Jordan, He was standing in the place of sinners. This is to fulfill all righteousness. The Sinless Son of God took His place under the Law of God in order to save us who are under the Law and yet who cannot fulfill the Law. This is to fulfill all righteousness. Because our righteousness is lacking—worse—altogether absent, Jesus took His place among sinners, under the Law, in order to meet all the Law's requirements and yet endure every consequence for breaking God's holy Law. This is to fulfill all righteousness. John the Baptist learned. The next time he saw Jesus coming, he pointed and declared: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus fulfills all righteousness. It's either your own righteousness or His.

7 Because Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness, because He has obeyed the Law perfectly, because He has endured every consequence of sin, His Church is a haven for sinners. Hypocrites, jerks to their neighbors, liars to their bosses, those who cheat on their taxes, adulterers who have sex outside marriage, murders who never shed blood but who think hateful thoughts, men who cheated on their wives, women who've had abortions, parents who've hurt their children with wicked words, teenagers who've bristled under their parents' authority, children who disobey, friends who betray, students who cheat, sinners of every type, every sin, every situation find haven here in Christ's Church because He has fulfilled all righteousness. You'll never be good enough, but that's the point. He is. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. Your righteousness doesn't matter. Quite the opposite. If you think your righteousness is what matters, if you want God to judge you based on your works, He will, and you'll be disappointed. But if you rely on the perfect righteousness of Jesus, you'll have perfect satisfaction.

8 In His baptism, Jesus begins His work of fulfilling all righteousness, of being perfectly righteous in your place. And in your baptism, He completes that work for you. What Jesus began in the Jordan and finished at Calvary He delivers to you in Jerseyville in the water of the font. In Holy Baptism, Jesus completes this blessed exchange. He takes your sin and delivers to you His righteousness. In Baptism, therefore, you have forgiveness. And in Baptism, you have new life. There, in the otherwise ordinary waters of Holy Baptism, Jesus frees you from your slavery to sin. So In His Church, there are only recovering sinners, those whose sinful flesh was crucified with Christ in Baptism and who long for the day of His return, when their sinful flesh is finally put asunder completely.

9 Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. Heaven is opened to you. God the Father boasts of you—even you!—"This is my beloved son. This is my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased." In the waters of Baptism, you are joined to Jesus and separated from your old sinful flesh. He has fulfilled all righteousness and delivered all righteousness to you.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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