

Fulfilling All Righteousness: Free To Obey

Matthew 3:13-17

January 13, 2008

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

If you were here last Sunday, I hope you paid attention to what you sang as we got ready to depart. In case you missed it, here again are the opening words of last week's invitation hymn: "Make me a captive, Lord, And then I shall be free."

That's an odd thing for a group of otherwise intelligent people to say or to sing. Make me a captive and I shall be free. Those words contradict each other. Either you are a captive, or you are free, but you can't be both. Right? Captivity means having to yield to someone else, to abide by someone else's word. Freedom means a lack of captivity; it means the complete absence of restraint; it means being able to do what you want.

At least that is what we are taught. According to modern understandings freedom resides in the authority of the individual to do as he or she pleases. The sum of everything we have been taught about ourselves tells us that we are autonomous individuals, which means that the locus of moral discernment and moral authority is in you and in me. We are self-determined creatures. I get to be the judge and jury of my life. I – and no one else – determines what is right or good for me.

A few years ago there was this depressingly nihilistic movie called *Changing Lanes*. It featured a character named Gavin Banek, an up and coming Wall Street attorney, and another character named Doyle Gibson, an out of work black man whose wife and kids have just left him. At the beginning of the movie, the two are involved in an altercation stemming from a traffic accident, and they spend the rest of the day going back and forth at each other, each attempting to seek revenge against the other. By the end of the day Banek even manages to get Gibson arrested on some trumped up charges.

At one point in the vicious cycle, Banek has a moment of ethical uncertainty. He begins to wonder if and how you can know right from wrong in a case like this. So, he goes to his father-in-law, who also happens to be his boss – the chief partner in this powerful law firm. He brings up some of the firm's ethically questionable practices and asks his father-in-law how he justifies it all. "Look," says papa lawyer, "at the end of the day I think I do more good than I do harm. What other standard do I have to go by?"

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Behold the modern man – free to do whatever he wants, free to make his own rules, free to make his own choices. Free to not have a clue as to what makes for a life rightly lived.

Jesus comes down to the Jordan River to get himself baptized by his cousin John. The baptism John offers is a baptism of repentance. This water bath is a sign of one's desire to turn around, to change one's ways. Which poses an interesting question. Why would Jesus need to get himself baptized? As the sinless Son of God, he has nothing of which he needs to repent, so what's he doing down in those muddy waters?

It is a question that apparently isn't lost on John, or on Matthew as he records his gospel account. All the gospel writers tell some version of this event, but only Matthew tells us about the hesitation of John the Baptist. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John asks. John's question echoes that of people down throughout the ages who read this story. Jesus doesn't need to be baptized.

Which, I think, is the whole point. Jesus doesn't get himself baptized because of some need that he chooses to meet. He doesn't go out to John in the wilderness because he is a spiritual seeker who has recognized a void in his life and he wonders if this desert preacher cousin of his might just have the missing piece he's looking for. For Jesus, baptism doesn't represent a choice he made. It is a choice his heavenly Father made for him.

"Let it be so now;" Jesus replied to John's question, "it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Translation: "It is required that you and I fulfill God's will, John, by allowing me to be baptized."¹ For Jesus, baptism was an act of obedience. It was a way of demonstrating that He had come into the world to do the will of His father. It was the Father who chose to send the Son into the world to redeem a sinful humanity. By submitting to a baptism of repentance, Jesus demonstrated not only His solidarity with us in our sin; he demonstrates His solidarity with the Father who sent him on our behalf.

Imagine that. Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, the One through whom and for whom all things were made, the One who is free and sovereign over all things – this One

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submitted, yielded, fulfilled his purpose and his calling by making himself captive to the will of another.

Maybe we need to rethink what real freedom looks like.

She and I served together on the board of directors for a local non-profit agency. She knew that I was the pastor of the Baptist church in town, so one night after a meeting she told me, "I am coming to your church this Sunday. I don't know how to describe it, but there is something missing in my life right now. I think I need church."

"Great!" I said, excited about the prospect of a new member in a small community where new members were hard to come by. I was sure we could offer her whatever it was she was missing. After all, isn't that how they say you are supposed to grow a church these days? Figure out whatever it is people think they need and then show them we in our church can provide that for them.

Sure enough, she was there the next Sunday. Only when the worship was over she didn't seem all that excited. Apparently we had failed to ignite the spark deep within her. She never came back.

What happened? Is it possible that our church simply wasn't the right church for her? Sure. But I think something else happened. Something was missing in her life, she had said, and she was looking for something to fill that void. Apparently, God was as good an option as anything else. But if that didn't do the trick right away, then maybe something else might work better. Whose to say? For all I know, maybe a trip to the Caribbean turned out to be the thing she was missing. At least she was free to choose.

But what if the key to fulfillment is found not in the freedom to choose, but in the willingness to submit. Jesus said he was being baptized to fulfill all righteousness. We tend to think of righteousness in moral terms. To be righteous means choosing to be good. But in biblical terms it means something else. Being righteous means being in right relationship with God, and whatever good one does is the result of that, not its cause.

¹ Quote taken from Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and*

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And in biblical terms, being in right relationship with God is not a choice we get to make; it is a choice God makes for us. He is the only one who is righteous, which means that he is the only One who has the power to right the relationship that we have wronged. So true righteousness, then, begins not with our choice to be good. In fact, it doesn't begin with us at all. It begins with God. The only way to embrace true righteousness is to recognize the claim that God has on our lives. It begins with acknowledging that what God has to say to us and about us is more important than anything we have to say about ourselves, no matter how free we think we are.

It begins, simply put, with obedience.

Which brings us back to that song we sang last Sunday, to those strange words about real freedom being found not in the absence of restraint, but rather in being captive to the right thing or to the right One.

Even more poignantly, it brings us back to our own baptisms. When we were plunged beneath those waters, we were doing more than joining a religious organization, and we were doing more than promising to be good boys and girls. Beneath those waters we were bearing witness to our submission to the righteousness of God. In baptism we dramatically reenact our desire to be obedient to what God says. That obedience is not born out of having a low opinion of ourselves, but out of the realization that we find ourselves most fully when we loose ourselves in the One who alone can give life.

This morning, we have the opportunity to share in an act that reaffirms that spirit of joyful submission, for today we ordain one from our midst to the office of Deacon. Ordination is an act of submission. It is a yielding of oneself to the claims that Jesus Christ and His church makes upon your life. It is a claim that is not limited to deacons by any means. We ordain people not so they can be obedient to God on our behalf while we go merrily about our selfish ways. No, we ordain them as a sign of the righteousness God seeks to impart to all of us.

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As we lay hands upon this brother in Christ, let us commit to live in such a way that the Father will say of us what he said of Jesus: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”