

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 01/08/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Baptism of the Lord

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, January 8th

Matthew 3:13-17

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Blessed are the Cheesemakers!

This week's lectionary text describes the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. An account of this baptism is found in all three of the synoptic Gospels. During the baptism of Jesus all three members of the Trinity are present and we have an account of God speaking directly to the people (the only other time this happens is during the Transfiguration of Jesus). In Matthew's account we also have the first spoken words of Jesus. The focus here is on the only character in the text who is without any divinity – John the Baptist. The Gospel of Matthew alone describes how John the Baptist first hesitated before he baptized Jesus. What was behind John's hesitation? What did John ultimately do? What are the implications of John's behavior for us today relative to the source of the authority that we choose to govern our lives?

Matthew 3:13-17 Commentary

Chapter 3 opens with the introduction of John the Baptist in the wilderness preaching repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. In v.11, John states: "*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" John is very clear on his status relative to the one to come.

¹³ *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.*

Matthew's account leaves no doubt that it was Jesus who took the initiative to seek out John to be baptized by him.

¹⁴ *John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"* ¹⁵ *But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.*

Based on John's understanding (revealed above in v.11), he was clearly expecting that he was the one who should be baptized by Jesus and not the other way around. When John objects, Jesus utters His first word's recorded in Matthew's Gospel (indicating the importance of the topic). Not surprisingly, Matthew as a Jew writing about Jesus (a Jew) to other Jews, righteousness is a dominant theme. John, regardless of his understanding based on his own calling, consents to Jesus' request.

¹⁶ *And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*

The Holy Spirit anoints Jesus as the Messiah and commissions Him as God's righteous servant (see Isaiah 42:1). The voice of God confirms the identity of the Messianic Son of God (Psalm 2:7).

Reflections

Leaving aside the theological significance of the events described by Matthew, John the Baptist's response to Jesus' request for baptism challenged John's expectation of the Messiah. It was John who expected to be baptized by Jesus rather than the other way around. We find ourselves in this same situation when Jesus asks us to do something we do not think is correct based on human reasoning or the norms of our culture. This is plainly seen today where many Christians first filter Scripture through the lens of human reasoning to determine which parts of the Bible to agree with and which parts to disagree with. In this way, human authority thus determines what is authoritative. The radical message of a transformed life has become toned down to appeal to self-focused consumerists.

To me, this approach is epitomized in the humorous scene from 1970s movie, *Life of Brian*, where characters are arguing with each other at the sermon on the mount. During the Beatitudes, one of the characters could not hear what was being said. Somebody turns and says, "*I think it was blessed are the cheesemakers.*" Another character asks, "*What so special about the cheesemakers?*" A more learned character argues, "*Obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally, it refers to any manufacturer of dairy products.*" While some found this movie offensive at the time, the movie essentially pokes fun at us, not Jesus. Modern interpretations of Scripture to fit our culture are not all that different than a Monty Python parody. Unfortunately, this is not funny.

Rather than looking at Scripture through the lens of human reasoning, it should be the other way around! It might be a good idea to look first through the lens of Scripture and decide on how to act in the world. Of course, I am not talking here of a fundamentalist literalism but of a careful and prayerful exegesis of the text within the context of the original audience. John the Baptist, who Jesus described as, "*... among those born of women there has arisen no one greater...*" (Matthew 11:11), had no problem taking Jesus at His Word, even when it contradicted his own understanding and expectations. We should too.

Application

- Who or what is the ultimate authority in your life?
- Where does Scripture conflict with worldly expectations in your life right now?
- Are there any unresolved value conflicts in your life?
- Where might Christ be bidding you to follow Him more closely?
- What action does this text cause you to take?