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It's the conversation between Jesus and John that's got my attention this week. I know that, under the circumstances, there are much more interesting things to pay attention to: the heavens torn open, the Spirit descending, and the divine voice are all rather more dramatic. But there's something about the little interaction between these two men that is integral. It's as if Matthew won't let us jump straight to the exciting stuff; before we hear God's affirmation, we have to deal with John's protest.

Personally, I find it pretty easy to understand John's reaction, when Jesus shows up on the riverbank, standing in line to be baptized, just like every other sinner and seeker in Jerusalem. He must have been stunned to look up and see the One he'd been yelling about in the desert for some time now, the One he'd promised would be coming with unquenchable fire, the One whose *sandals* were too holy to be handled, now waiting to be prayed over and plunged under the water. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, isn't supposed to be standing in line with the world's sinners.

John is not alone in his surprise. Lots of people have wondered what on earth Jesus was there for. The Scriptures confirm that if anyone didn't need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, it's Jesus. He's the only one who never needed to be called to repentance. Commentators and scholars love to go back and forth about what's going on here. What does Jesus mean that this is the thing that needs to be done, in order to "fulfill all righteousness"? Matthew loves to have things fulfilled--he's like a broken record, saying over and over that such and such a thing happened so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled. But there is no Scripture

reference, not even an obscure one, that suggests that the Messiah had to be baptized. The experts remain, more or less, baffled; the explanations tend to be unsatisfying.

I don't get the sense that John was overly satisfied with Jesus' answer either. Matthew tells us that he consented, but he doesn't say that John understood. I don't imagine a sudden light bulb over his head. I doubt very much that he and Jesus shared a wink and a knowing nod before getting down to business. I still see John shaking his head, wondering if his preaching had missed the mark. It looks like he shrugged his shoulders and got on with what is clearly a confusing and, frankly, underwhelming request.

And I have to wonder if that's not at least part of Matthew's point, if that's not what he wants us to see, here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Perhaps we can't really go on, we can't really begin to understand the gospel, until we deal with startling image of Jesus--whose footwear is more righteous than us--really, actually, in line with us; really, actually in John's arms, plunged under the water, sputtering and gasping just like the rest of us, even as the heavens are being torn open above him.

I read a great line this week, which is, "admiration can be a dodge." It's true, isn't it? Admiration is a perfectly good way of avoiding, a fully sanctioned way of letting ourselves off the hook. For instance, it is worlds easier to watch a skilled musician, or cheer for an elite athlete, or marvel at the artists' craft, than to put in the hours of practice, years of dedication, disappointment and underwhelming moments that add up to something beautiful.

For me, it's musicians. Guitarists, especially. Whenever I watch a really fine guitarist, I always find myself quite amazed. The instrument seems to be an

extension of the player, the precision and coordination of fingers and sounds can be breathtaking. And I often find myself thinking, "Man, I wish I could do that." Which is an inverted way of saying, "I could never do that." Which is mostly a lie. Maybe not a complete, straight-up lie. Maybe like, eighty percent. Because it's true, that there are people who seem to have an innate capacity to do miraculous things with an instrument that mere mortals can only gawk at in wonder. But mostly the truth is that I just don't practice. And it's just a lot easier to sit in wonder at a performance and tell myself that the artist must be endowed with superhuman gifts and skills. I'm quite content to simply admire from a distance. That way, I'm off the hook. I couldn't have done it, even if I tried. And I never have to find out whether that's true or not.

I feel like our gospel story this morning reminds us that Christian faith poses a similar challenge. It seems to me that this is one more instance in which we see that Jesus, and his good news, are relentlessly present and personally demanding. We should be no less surprised to find the Savior of the world in line with its sinners, than we were to find him lying in a feed box, surrounded by shepherds. It's a reminder that we don't stop talking about Emmanuel, God With Us, now that we're through Epiphany, and the Christmas decorations are put away. That wasn't just a charming bit of poetry that added texture to the holiday season. It's the fact of Christmas. And, having proclaimed the fact in awe and wonder, now the task is working it out.

When Jesus arrives, all grown up on the riverbank we're faced with the unavoidable and sometimes uncomfortable reality that he will not be abstracted or avoided by our enthusiasms or our expectations. It was, we must admit, easier when we were waiting for the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, to tear open the heavens and come to us, to save us. It was

easier when we were just waiting for the One who was coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire; ready, with his winnowing fork in hand, to consume all unrighteousness with the unquenchable flame of his glory. That sort of thing can get a crowd buzzing. That's exciting stuff. And it seems to be at a safe and heavenly remove from the ins and outs of our everydays.

But Matthew knows that the story, the real good news of the kingdom of God is not going to be about how excited the crowds get for Jesus, or how dynamic preaching about him is; it won't be about how much people admire him from a safe distance and hope in him as an ideal or a theological proposition; but about how people receive him as he comes, and obey when he speaks. Jesus will not be admired into avoidable abstraction. He won't let us off the hook that way.

Instead, he shows up and draws us in. He calls and commands.

And I think we see the natural inclination of our hearts acted out when John puts up his hands and says, "Whoa, Jesus. I need to be baptized by you, not the other way around." Whether it's a tidal wave of humility that comes at the thought of such intense intimacy with the Word made flesh, or a healthy fear at the prospect of being up to our waists in the things of heaven, or a kind of holy performance anxiety, it seems to be a natural response to put up our hands in self-defense when Jesus shows up and says, "Baptize me. *You* Follow me. *You* Love your enemies. Lose your life. Pick up your cross. Live abundantly." It's easy, and decidedly safer, to watch as Jesus does that stuff--as Jesus is obedient and extravagantly loving, as he is crucified and risen.

It's easy to assume that there are others who are equipped to be his disciples, doing the things he does--more spiritual, gifted, or holy folks--who have gifts of faith we

couldn't ever hope for.

It's an altogether different thing when he shows up and calls us to the same.

And yet, the hope and the promise is that it's John's befuddled consent to Jesus as he is, it's John's surprised but believing obedience to Jesus' will and way that brings us right into the thick of the gospel, the wildly good news of God with us. John sets aside his expectations, his better judgments, even his deepest and most faithful desires, and does what Jesus says. He receives Jesus, no longer an exciting idea but now as physical and just about intimate as possible. And as he does, the heavens are torn open. The Father's word pours into the world, the Spirit lands.

I don't want to suggest that had John, for whatever reason, refused to baptize Jesus, that somehow Jesus would be less the beloved Son, or that his kingdom mission would have been derailed. A goodly portion of the good news is that God's decision to be with us and for us has not terribly much to do with our capacity to understand the fact. But I do want to pay close attention to the gift of this scene as we find ourselves back at the beginning of the story, as we ready ourselves once more to follow Jesus where he calls.

Because Jesus is about to start telling us to do weird things again. By comparison, what he asks John to do is fairly straightforward. I mean, the Sermon on the Mount is only a couple of chapters away. Jesus is going to tell us what he expects of us, and it's not for the faint of heart.

I also don't want to suggest that Jesus isn't the proper object of our most passionate worship. He absolutely is. But I'm reminded again of Karl Barth's outrageous insistence that we only know God through obedience. Except that we set aside our expectations of who and how God is, and instead allow ourselves to be shaped in

the will and the way of the one who is God With Us, we can't even truly know who we're praising.

But, if, like John, we allow ourselves the stunned wonder of finding him in line with the rest of us, if we'll listen when he calls *us* and obey when he commands *us* beyond our expectations, then we begin to know more and more and impossibly more, the height and depth and length and width of the love of this God for us and for this world. We come to know, intimately and personally, the One who refuses to stay away, but instead tears apart the distance between us, who will give even his own life to be for us.

And then we'll really know what it means to be lost in wonder, love and praise.

Amen.