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Return love for hate, Jesus' baptism teaches us

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The Peace Pulpit

I think as we hear the Gospel today, we're not surprised, in a way, that John objects to Jesus when Jesus comes to John for baptism -- because John has the idea that he had been sent to prepare the way for the one who was to come.

And he thought that he recognized in Jesus that special one, and so he wanted to say to Jesus: "No, I shouldn't baptize you. You're the one who is to come, the special, chosen one of God. You should baptize me."

And Jesus answers him in a way that might seem confusing to us.

He said: "Let it be as it is now so that we may fulfill all righteousness."

Now that doesn't make a lot of sense to us, I don't think. What did Jesus mean to fulfill all righteousness?

What the Psalm says, in the Hebrew scriptures -- righteousness -- is to be in conformity with the will of God, to be completely following that will of God. So what Jesus is saying is: "Let's not get into a discussion about who is higher or lower."

That's sort of what John was thinking: "You're more important than I am." No, Jesus says: "That's not important." He says: "Simply each of us must try to discern what is God's will for me, and fulfill it, fulfill all righteousness, fulfill God's will."

So then John said: "Okay." And he went ahead and he baptized Jesus. Again, this might not be so clear to

us immediately but this is an extraordinary turning point then in the life of Jesus.

Obviously during the long years that He had been living what we call the "hidden life," He had been praying and searching out -- trying to discern what is God's will for me?

Now, suddenly, as he comes up out of the River Jordan -- he had been baptized by John -- Jesus has this extraordinary experience that gives him direction and that truly changes his life -- sets him in a direction from which he will never turn back, and will lead to his suffering and his death because God -- as Jesus comes up out of the water -- allows Jesus to experience God speaking to him: "You are my beloved, the chosen one. In you I am well pleased."

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Now those words might not be immediately clear to us where they come from or what exactly they mean, but for Jesus it was very clear. These are the first words of our first lesson today, that 42nd chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The Prophet speaks about his servant: "Here is my servant, the chosen one, in whom I am well pleased." Then he goes on to explain who this servant is. He is called to bring true justice into the world to all the nations, to transform our world into a place where everyone has a full human life -- an extraordinary call.

This is the servant who is to bring God's reign, God's kingdom, into being -- to make it happen.

It's an overwhelming task and responsibility that Jesus is given but, then, it's also clear that Jesus has to do this in a very unusual, almost unbelievable, way -- because Isaiah says about the servant: "The servant is very gentle."

And the servant does not use power or force or might because as the Prophet puts it: "I put My spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations, to all the world, but he does not shove or raise his voice. Proclamations are not heard in the streets."

What Isaiah is talking about is a call to war, a call to arms. You would think if he's going to have this task to change everything, he will need to have power and might.

A call to arms was when people called out in the streets -- people had to come and join in the leader's armies -- but this servant doesn't shout or call out in the streets. Instead, this is done in very poetic language but the message is so clear.

"A broken reed he will not crush." You can see a tiny plant, it's bent and broken. You have to treat it with gentleness, with great care. So that's how this servant acts: gently, with care, with love.

"Nor will he snuff out the light of the wavering wick." It's the same thing. You have a fire and it's just about gone. You want to make the fire burst into a fullness of flame. You breathe on it very gently, blow on those embers and the flames come forth, but again, you see it's a sign of gentleness, of caring.

It's not a sign of power or force or might. In other words, this servant is being called to transform the world by love -- by love and no other way. It's almost unbelievable, isn't it?

He has to change the world, make justice happen, but it isn't because he decides: "I'm going to rearrange things this way or that way."

He draws forth life, calls people to follow, leads the way by showing himself to be a person of gentleness and love and compassion -- a person who gives up violence, who only works in the way of love.

That, of course, as we know from our studies of the Gospel following the life of Jesus, clearly he saw that as his call -- to be the one who would transform the world through acts of love, not through violence, not through hatred, not returning evil for evil, but just the opposite: love -- always responding to hatred with love, to violence with powerlessness.

That's how Jesus acted. It's so clear in the Gospels, especially if you go on to Matthew's Gospel, the next chapter, chapter five. He begins the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus lays forth all the values that he follows in trying to make the reign of God happen.

"Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek, the gentle. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the peacemakers." All the values of Jesus are proclaimed and that's how Jesus lived his life and found the way of God, the way that, as he said to John, "We must fulfill all righteousness." Jesus was totally faithful to that.

Of course, when we celebrate today the baptism of Jesus, we remind ourselves of our own baptism, when we made the commitment -- or was made for us and then we make it ourselves later in our life -- to do as Peter was doing: preach to the people, bear witness to Jesus by following his way.

Of course, we recognize that we live in a world where that's not happening. In the paper this morning, I read a comment of someone about the terrible tragedy that took place in Arizona yesterday. Imagine this young man, 22 years old, comes in with an automatic weapon, just opens fire on totally innocent people, kills -- what was it, six of them -- wounds 22.

What's going on? The comment in the paper was, "That's not the country I grew up in."

Well, I'm not so sure. We're a country where violence has been present from our very beginning -- a violent revolution to start with. We wage wars. We're in a war now that has been going on really since 1991; two wars. We turn to violence so easily as a nation.

Don't you think that kind of spreads an attitude so that people begin to think that's the only way to act? If someone hurts me, I have to hurt them. If someone attacks me, I respond with an attack.

But Jesus was the opposite.

Return love for hate. Return goodness for evil. That's the way of Jesus as we hear proclaimed at his baptism, then how he lived his life.

If we're ever going to overcome violence in our country and in our world, we must begin to listen much more deeply to what Jesus did in today's Gospel when he was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, to fulfill the will of God -- a God who is love and he calls us to be people of love.

I hope that as we renew our baptismal promises today -- which we will do as our profession of faith -- that each of us will understand: I am making a commitment to follow Jesus, to live according to his teachings and according to his way, which is only the way of love.

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