

Message: "The Case for Formality"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

There is a formal system in our country which is designed to help us move forward collectively in a positive, mutually supportive way - we call it voting. We use this system of formality to highlight the consensus of the majority, helping elections to function, legislation to be presented and passed, and to clarify the will of the people regarding issues relevant to everyday life. This system of formality has served not only us but many nations over the years to create a foundation of equity and justice that most people would agree is beneficial to the population as a whole. It works for such ends - except when it doesn't. And sadly, there are a growing number of moments when it has an opposite function, where it serves to point out just how unhealthy our political realm is.

Take, for example, the recent acrobatics in our nation's congress, specifically in the vote for the position of Speaker of the House. Have you been watching those proceedings? I believe the final vote has been taken, which was the 15th vote. This was the longest such contest in 164 years of our country's history. To gain the votes needed, the game was afoot, whereby the main contender worked the formal system with concession after concession after concession to the authority and integrity of the position as it historically functioned - a line from one of my favorite movies comes to mind - "The outcome was a foregone conclusion insofar as you were willing to sacrifice any principle."

The formal system of voting has served a different purpose this time - to highlight just how unhealthy our political system has become. I think it is safe to say that this is further evidence that our country remains in a very fragile state, politically speaking. There are far too many other examples like this, where the formal system that is designed to work for the good of many has been taken hostage by a well-versed few for the sake of their own self-serving agendas; the relatively recent phenomena of election denial based on no evidence, the refusal to accept scientific evidence supported by almost all credentialed professionals, the Supreme Court being transparently stacked to favor one political perspective - the reason these are regular features of headline-news is that the formal

systems they represent are being irrationally employed and destructively manipulated for all to see.

The point is this: formal systems can serve to highlight what is wrong, because they exist to move us towards what is right. In this sense, they serve an essential purpose of shining a light of clarification upon both what is right and what is wrong and help us to work against the wrong and for the right collectively.

This provides a background for considering the formal system Jesus is engaging in our scripture lesson today. Many a scholar has voiced their consternation regarding this text, where Jesus approaches John the Baptist to formally enter the religious protocol of ministerial authority. But wait a minute - Jesus approaches John for authority? But Jesus is God, the supreme authority; isn't this backward? It's like the parent asking the child for permission, or the coach asking the player for guidance, or the Bishop asking the pastor for direction.....Shouldn't it be the other way around, with John seek approval and authority from Jesus? The scriptural text says that "Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; **for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.**" Then John consented."

The system that was placed in the world by God was the monotheistic platform known as Judaism; one only has to read the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible, to know it was a very imperfect system, at least in its implementation by the human species. Nonetheless, Jesus entered the world with a nod to that system by insisting on being initiated through baptism. I do not sense that this was a ritualistic motivation more than an acknowledgement of the entire motivation of Jesus and his incarnation - namely that through the formalities of religious faith, the brokenness of the world could be redressed by the repairing attributes of love. To put it concisely, God entered the world formally in Jesus, to move what is wrong toward what is right.

I remember a time when this sense of a formal system worked in my pastoral ministry without me even realizing its value. I was a new pastor, only a couple of months into my first appointment, when a terrible tragedy occurred - a young man of around 29 years old had been killed in a tanker-truck accident. He left a family of his wife and three young children. They and their extended family were members of my congregation. I remember receiving a call informing me of the tragic occurrence; my wife and I went quickly to the home of the young mother,

where the emotional atmosphere was overwhelming. It was precisely then that I learned that there are many things Seminaries do not train you for, and this was one of them. What do you say at a time like that? What do you do? This was my first experience of having someone in my congregation die, let alone die tragically, and I had not been briefed on what to say or do precisely (please note: there is no precision when it comes to pastoral care in the midst of extreme tragedy, but I did not know this back then.....). All my wife and I knew to do was make ourselves present, to listen, hold hands, pray, and love them any way we could.

The funeral came and went, and it was both extremely hard but graciously comforting to the family. A few weeks went by, and I received a call from the father of the young widow; his name was Jim, and he wanted to meet with me. We arranged a meeting at the church, whereupon he began to ask my advice regarding how to support his daughter and her family; should he provide financial support, offer to have them move in with them to save expenses, talk about future plans for their grandchildren, and a whole host of very personal issues. I was struck by this, for here was a man who was twice my age, with family and vocation and community connections I had just begun to assemble in my own life. I felt like saying to him, "WHY ARE YOU ASKING ME?" It seemed to me that he had so much more wisdom and experience than I had at the age of 26 years old, just starting my ministry and my family. I did ask him kindly why he was asking me these things, and his response said it all - he said, "I've come to you BECAUSE YOU'RE MY PASTOR." My formal role was an important touchstone for Jim in the lost state he and his family were in. Perhaps it was because of my newness to the role of being a pastor that I spent almost all of my time with Jim simply listening to his internal dialogue (because I had no idea what to do or say), but it gave to him what he needed, and it showed me the value of my formal role from the perspective of one in need of company in a valley of deep shadow.

Formality has its place, both to highlight what is wrong and what to do about it. "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness," says Jesus. This counsel of Jesus is a part of our faith understanding - we are to be intentional in our purpose and passion, to clarify that it is God's agenda that we seek to make our own. We state this formally by the lives we live more than the words we profess, with Jesus as our guide, showing us what needs to come about for the betterment of ourselves and our world. It is to the integrity of our faith that we formally and continually acknowledge our need for God, and God's incarnation.