

# "Fulfilling All Righteousness"

Matthew 3:13-15

January 9, 2011

1st Sunday After the Epiphany

In our Lutheran church, there is nothing particularly unusual about baptism. We often see it happen in our sanctuary. What *is* unusual is to have the baptismal font set up when there is no one to be baptized. The reason we do that is to remind us of something very strange happening in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus, the Son of God, presents himself for baptism. That seems difficult to understand and downright odd. Jesus did not need baptism. He did not need forgiveness for sins because He had committed none. He did not need new life because He was the creator and giver of life. He did not need eternal life in heaven because heaven was His natural home. Even John himself was struck by the absurdity of the situation. When Jesus came to him for baptism, John said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Yet, as strange as it may have seemed to John and as strange as it may seem to you, the baptism of Jesus was a necessary and wonderful thing for you and me.

Why did Jesus get baptized? We can liken the situation to a theatrical device called an understudy or a "stand in". I'm sure you know what this is. Sometimes, in performing a play, you need someone to substitute for an actor. You need the "stand in" whenever the actor cannot do the job. Maybe the actor is sick or lost his voice. You need the "stand in" whenever the actor will not do the job. Maybe the actor is being temperamental and refusing to go on. If he can't or won't do his job and perform, the success of the entire production is threatened.

But then the director calls the "stand in". He will come and "stand in" for the first actor and substitute for him. He may not be as good of an actor, but he will perform for the first actor in that actor's place. He will do everything the same as the first actor was supposed to do, but couldn't or wouldn't do.

This is like life. Shakespeare said "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women are merely players." God has given you a role to perform in this drama called life on stage earth. He created you to live in harmony with Him -- loving Him, obeying Him, serving Him, and worshiping Him. He also created you to live in harmony with each other -- loving and serving one another. Such a relationship would guarantee a perfect performance and rave reviews.

But we are not doing a good job in our "performance". We are failing to carry out this production as God intends. You don't need a preacher to tell you that. You can SEE that. Read the newspaper. Watch TV. See how people act so cruelly to one another -- hurting one another, robbing one another, murdering one another, warring against one another. Then look into your own heart. What have you been doing to one another? Arguing with your spouse? Being cruel to your children? Disobeying your parents? Failing to uphold your responsibilities at work? Other things, such as jealousy, anger, rage, grudges, and so on are common.

Check your attitude toward God -- how has that been? Have you been concentrating upon loving, worshiping, and serving Him first and foremost in your lives? Or have you been concentrating on your own wants and desires until a problem comes up or you need something and then you turn to Him? Have you been worshiping Him and dwelling upon His Word faithfully, not only in church but also in your private life and family life? Are you using your time, skills, and financial resources for His purposes first and foremost or are you taking care of your business and your desires and giving Him only the leftovers?

Now you may say, "Yeah, but *sometimes* I am good, kind, and loving to other people. Sometimes I worship and serve the Lord." You may even say, "Most of the time I'm that way." Maybe that's true. But our holy God requires people to live, think, and act holy. He says, "You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy," says Scripture. So, even if you are doing what's right and good often, that is not enough. You are not doing all that God requires. You cannot do all that God requires. Not only can you not do all that God requires, but would not do all that God requires. Your sinful desires control you and your behavior. You are in danger of obtaining God's wrath and punishment.

So, God sent a "stand in". But this "stand in" was not someone who was second best, but someone far better than we are. God sent His one and only Son to be our substitute. Since it was mankind who had offended God, violated His Law, and sinned, it was necessary for a man to live holy, obey God's Law, and obtain salvation. The Bible says, " Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity." Yet only God could have the power and authority to remove sin and restore fallen humanity. Therefore, God's Son became a human being - the man Jesus Christ - just like us. Jesus came to substitute for us and become our stand in because we had failed and

couldn't do the job. Jesus' work was to do everything we were supposed to do, but to do it successfully.

So, Jesus was baptized, just like we are baptized. Jesus did not need the benefits of baptism: forgiveness, new life, and faith. When John was surprised and said, "You come to me for baptism", Jesus said, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus knew that He had to "fulfill all righteousness" -- do all the things that had to be done. Jesus knew that He did not need baptism, but He accepted it for us because we need baptism.

And so it goes. Jesus experienced temptation, just like we are tempted. After He was baptized, Jesus immediately went out into the desert where Satan tempted Him for 40 days. But, instead of giving in to temptation and sinning like every person has done since Adam, Jesus did not give in and sin. Jesus overcame temptation and the Tempter for us. The Book of Hebrews says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are --yet was without sin." He correctly obeyed all of God's Law in our place as our "stand in".

Jesus died, just like we all deserve to die and will die. That's the punishment for sin. Jesus had not done anything to deserve death, but He took the punishment for us by taking the sin of the world -- your sin --to the cross. In fact, the Bible describes it this way: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21) Jesus died a terrible death on that cross in our place, but He overcame it. He did not stay dead, but He rose from the dead and became alive on Easter morning. He rose to the new life that God had created Adam and Eve with and which He always intended you to have. Jesus was indeed the perfect stand in.

Yet there is one crucial difference. If a "stand in" substitutes for another actor in the theater and does a good job, who gets the credit? The "stand in" does. He gets the praise, the reviews, and all the credit.. But in this situation, it is different. Jesus acts as our "stand in", does everything completely successfully, and it is we who benefit. He was baptized, tempted, overcame successfully, and lived holy and now we receive His righteousness for ourselves. He suffered death and hell on the cross for the sin of the world and now we receive pardon for our sins and we escape the punishment of hell that it merits. He rose from the dead to life eternal and now we rise from the dead to live eternally.

How do we receive all of those wonderful things? Go back to where Jesus began as our substitute: when He was baptized. He got baptized in our place and now we get benefits of baptism. When we are baptized, we are joined to Jesus Christ and all of His work. We are joined to His holy life and it becomes our holy life. We are joined to His death and it becomes our death -- the punishment for our sins. We are joined to Jesus' resurrection and it becomes our resurrection from death to live eternally in heaven with God.

That brings us back to the baptismal font set up in the middle of our sanctuary even when no baptism is scheduled. Jesus stepped into the water of baptism to fulfill all righteousness. He took our sins out of the water and to the cross and grave. We step into the water of baptism and take out forgiveness for sins and His righteousness. Every time we come into this sanctuary and, especially, every time we approach this altar, we do it, literally, through baptism. Christ came to our sinful state through baptism so that we might come to Him through that same baptism and obtain His holiness. Every time you see this font when you go to receive Holy Communion, remember that righteous state in which you stand before God. It is so because, in your place, Christ has fulfilled all righteousness. Amen.