

“Chosen to Serve”
Matthew 3:13-17
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Today is a special day in the life of our church because it's the day that our newly elected elders will be ordained if they haven't already been ordained and installed on the Session. We make it a point to mark the beginning of their ministry with the ordination and installation service because it helps us remember that putting together a group of people to provide leadership for the church isn't only about efficiency or imitating what other businesses or organizations do. Calling people to lead and serve the church is God's work, and that leadership is carried out with God's help, for God's purposes, and in service to God's mission. We recognize all of this when we ordain and install new elders.

I believe that it's as the Holy Spirit would have it that the lectionary and the liturgical calendar provide us with an especially fitting Gospel text for our hearing on this day when a new era of leadership and ministry will be inaugurated for our church. It's the story about the inauguration of Jesus's public ministry which was marked by his baptism. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all give an account of Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist, and today we hear the story as it is told in Matthew. Let's listen together for God's word as we hear the reading from 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 God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

In the verses leading up to verse 13, Matthew talks about the people who were coming out to the wilderness to be baptized by John. First, there were lots of ordinary Jewish folks who seemed to recognize and believe that John was a prophet sent from God, and they wanted to be baptized as a sign of their repentance and readiness to participate in the new thing God was about to do. Next, there were Scribes and Pharisees who seemed only to be coming to check off a box, but John saw through them and knew that they weren’t truly repentant. Then, after these two groups, Jesus came asking to be baptized, and John wasn’t quite sure what to do with his request.

His initial impulse was to refuse on the grounds that Jesus, as Messiah, should be exalted not lumped in with all the common Israelites that he had been sent to save, but he changed his mind and went along after Jesus told him that they needed to do it “to fulfill all righteousness.” The text says that John *consented* which is a

translation of the Greek word which means to let go, permit, or allow. I like the phrase “to let go,” because after Jesus told him that he needed to baptize Jesus to fulfill God’s plan, that’s what John did. He let go of his own idea about what should happen and submitted to what Jesus told him he should do.

John’s willingness to baptize Jesus was crucial to the fulfillment of God’s plan, but Jesus’s willingness to be baptized was also crucial. Jesus’s consent to being baptized showed his own willingness to do things God’s way. He was ready to begin and carry out his ministry as a humble servant, in obedience to God, and in solidarity with God’s people. We have been talking about this idea during the Christmas season. Jesus is God with us. He shares in our humanity and in our suffering to save us from it through the life like ours that he lived, and his death, and resurrection. This was God’s plan, and it began to take shape when John said yes to baptizing Jesus and Jesus said yes to being baptized.

As we pay attention to John especially in this text, we can see an important movement from surprise to surrender. Jesus seems to be already surrendered to God’s way by this point, but John was surprised at first by Jesus’s request for baptism because of what he already thought he understood about what God was doing and about his own role in relationship to Jesus. I think this sense of surprise is a relatable moment in the story for many of us because it seems like God’s people often feel surprised when Jesus approaches us and asks us to do something so that God’s plans will be fulfilled.

For example, you get a phone call from someone on the nominating committee asking you to consider serving as an elder, and you think they got the wrong number. You can name ten other people that you think would be better qualified, and like John, your first impulse is to say no. I've shared with you before my own hesitation when I first began to sense God's call to ministry as a pastor. I resisted the thought, and part of the reason was because I didn't think I fit the mold of the type of person that God would be looking for. I had no real experience preaching, and I wasn't a man!

It's so easy for us to imagine that we clearly understand what God is up to all the time or that we know who God has or hasn't chosen for one role or another, and it's funny that we have so much confidence in our own understanding because one thing that we see again and again in the Bible and in our own experience is that God is surprising. Is it not surprising that the King of Kings is born in a stable not a palace? Is it not surprising that God in Christ shares our humanity? Is it not surprising that Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? *It is* surprising! God is full of surprises and when God surprises us with a call from the nominating committee, or with some other unexpected opportunity to speak, or to move, or to act, to accomplish God's will, it's important for us to have the capacity to be able to make the same move that John did - from surprise to surrender. We want to be able to let go and consent to what Jesus is asking us to do.

Saying yes to Jesus can be scary. Especially if we feel like we are being called to do something that will be demanding on us, or will

take us outside our comfort zone, or something that we don't feel fully equipped to do. When people consider the call to serving as elders, these are common reasons for hesitation, but one thing that can help us move beyond surprise, hesitation, or flat-out resistance to surrender is when we understand the nature of God's call. What we see revealed in God's call and plan for Jesus is something that is true about God's call to all of us.

One thing that is revealed is that God's call to us isn't a call to be successful as anyone other than God defines success. In the eyes of many, Jesus was a complete failure as the Messiah. He didn't overthrow the Romans or usher in a new era of political freedom and prosperity for Israel, yet he was a success in God's eyes as he faithfully fulfilled God's vision for the Messiah. When it comes to their elders or pastor, a congregation might have expectations about what their leaders need to do to be successful, and as leaders we might have our own ideas about what we think we need to do or accomplish to be successful, but Jesus shows us that it's not meeting other people's expectations but our faithfulness to Christ that makes us truly successful.

Another thing that is revealed to us about the nature of God's call is that God's call to leaders is a call to service. This is what was happening in Jesus's baptism. He was being set apart to serve. Yes, as elders we are set apart for a job and endowed with some authority and in some sense we are given power, but that power is meant to be exercised through humility and service. When we are put in positions that come with some amount of power, there is a temptation to take

advantage of the role and the power, but our job isn't to be controlling or to tell people to do what they should be doing or what we want them to do. Our job is to serve – to step in and do the things that help make the church stronger and facilitate the ministry whether that's stewarding the finances or unlocking the building on Sunday morning for worship. Of course we can ask for people's help, and we can set an example that influences others to follow, but we do this through service offered in love to Christ and the church.

A final thing that is revealed about the nature of God's call to us is that the service that we do is always aimed toward serving *God's* larger mission which is a mission to restore God's righteousness and shalom to the earth. That was the reason that Jesus told John that he needed to baptize him – to fulfill all righteousness. That was a way of saying that what they were doing wasn't about fulfilling their personal goals or agendas, but it was about serving God's purposes. That's also what we *get* to do, and remembering that *God's* mission is ultimately the goal can transform the way we think of our work – especially the tasks that feel mundane. It can also relieve us of the pressure that we may feel at times to come up with great new ideas or to come up with all the solutions to every challenge. Elders can and should have ideas, but our call is to discern the difference between *good ideas* and *God ideas* and to pursue the God ideas.

I haven't touched yet on the second half of the passage where after Jesus's baptism, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove upon him, but this part of the story shows us something important: when we make the move from surprise to surrender and

say yes to what God calls us to do, God doesn't leave us to do the work on our own. The way opens up for the Spirit to come and fill us, to empower us, and lead us into the work God has planned. As our new elders begin their ministry, and as our sitting elders continue to pursue Jesus's call, and as all of us support and follow their leadership, this is what we want – to be filled, empowered, and led by the Holy Spirit so that what we do here at LPC truly is ministry that aligns with and furthers God's good plans.

When you came to church today, some of you may have been feeling the heaviness that comes from witnessing the brokenness in our world. There are so many wrongs that we long to see righted. We hunger and thirst for God's shalom in our lives, in our community, in our country, and in our world. When we talk about the ministry of our new leaders who will say yes to leading us in ways that help all of us together to carry out God's will, this is what we're talking about. LPC doesn't exist just so we can be a place to meet new friends or to find activities to do to keep ourselves busy. Our church exists so that we can do the part of God's work that God has entrusted to us. We need leaders who can help us with that, and thankfully, God has called and provided those leaders for us. Today as they make their commitment to God and to us to faithfully serve and lead, the rest of us are called on to make our commitment to follow and join in- trusting that the same Spirit who is at work in our elders is at work among all of us. May we, like John and like Jesus, move from surprise to surrender, say yes to God's call, and trust that the Spirit will lead us as we serve together. Amen.

