

Sunday, January 12, 2014: Matthew 3:13-17

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue

When I arrived in Alabama as a Methodist bishop, I asked a distinguished Alabama historian to orient me to my new appointment. He told me a story.

“This ole boy drove out from Birmingham to buy firewood. He stopped at a rundown house in the country that had a sign out front: ‘Firewood 4 Sale.’”

“Friend, I’d like to order a load of firewood,” the man said to the patriarch who was dozing in a rocker on the front porch. The old man roused himself and sneered back, “You can’t order me to do nothin’.”

It’s not only Alabamians who think we’ve created a world in which we need not be obedient to anyone but ourselves. As Milton Friedman taught us, a liberal, capitalist polity makes freedom “our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements.” Friedman admits that people in societies like ours have difficulty holding themselves together, working on problems and giving citizens a sense of direction when they’re used to doing as they damn well please. Yet Friedman believes that ours is still the best of all possible social arrangements.

My most disarming, countercultural experience as bishop was when ordinands knelt before me and swore—in front of God and the church—to “obey the bishop,” specifically to sleep in whatever Alabama bed I put them in. This subordination of family, social mobility and personal freedom to the mission of the church moves me—and is downright un-American.

But just as the service of ordination has its origin in the rite of baptism, the church’s (all too rare) exhortations to obedience are based in the peculiar nature of baptism.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism by John is surely indebted to Mark (1:9–11). Note that immediately after the voice proclaims that Jesus is God’s Son, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness. The linkage suggests that whatever being God’s Son means, it includes obedience to the will of God—and finding oneself cast into strange, dangerous locations. Later Jesus would note that unlike his own situation, even foxes have dens (Matt. 8:20). The obedient Son had nowhere to lay his head,

not because he enjoyed traveling, but because he was under orders.

As in Mark, Jesus' baptism in Matthew reveals him to be the unique revelation of God, God's Son. Even the Baptizer is subordinate to Jesus (3:11, 14). Yet Matthew appears to be answering the church's question: Why did Jesus need to undergo John's baptism?

The answer lies in Jesus' definition of his baptism as "to fulfill all righteousness." When Jesus speaks in verse 15, his words add to Mark's account. They must be a key to interpretation.

How wise of the church, after the sappy sentimentality that inundates Christmas, to turn us toward talk of obedience in Epiphany. Before we meet Jesus the compassionate healer, the wise teacher, the fierce prophet, we meet him as fully obedient to God rather than to the whims of the carping crowd, or even the calls of omnivorous human need. This is fulfillment of righteousness.

Matthew uses the word *righteous* seven times, to mean an act of human obedience to a divine demand. When the voice proclaims, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," Matthew makes God's pleasure specific—the divine Son's obedience. In being baptized, Jesus fulfills "all righteousness."

*Fulfill*, however, is never used to describe the righteousness of the disciples. It's Jesus who fulfills all righteousness, leaving his disciples free to *practice* righteousness by following Jesus (Matt. 5:20, 48). The Servant whose chief service is to "establish justice in the earth" will help them (1:23, 28:20).

To sing "Jesus loves me" is not enough. My church's founder, John Wesley, smirked that love without obedience is barely Christian.

We are to obediently and joyfully play our bit parts in righteousness, and to do so from love rather than obsequious compliance to divine demands. When Jesus calls his disciples, it's as if he says, "I've enjoyed obedience to the truth; now you try it." In this obedience is true freedom.

During a work session with Stanley Hauerwas, I was whining about the unrighteousness of our accommodated church. Stanley told me about a Sunday at his church when several members gave testimonies. The first, a young mother of three children, testified that her life mainly involved bringing up the couple's

children as part of the church by teaching them Bible stories, bringing them to church and helping them learn what it means to be members of the body of Christ. "I know that's not much, but right now I think that's what God wants from me."

Next, a young man, a bureaucrat in a state agency, told the congregation that he comes to church to be reminded that Christians don't lie. "Every day I'm surrounded with lies, and it's hard to resist becoming part of the system of lies." While truthfulness does not contribute to his advancement, he would rather submit to the demands entailed in being a Christian, "and I can't lie without God making me tell the truth."

Our efforts to be obedient may bring unforeseen reactions. One day my doctor said to me, "Some of my friends are upset by your suit against the governor. They object to the stink you've caused about Alabama immigration laws."

"Sorry that I got you into trouble with your buddies at the club," I lied.

"Like I told 'em," my doctor said. "He's a Methodist preacher. He said what he had to say."

My ministry is undeserving of such high praise.