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Sermon Series: *Advent's Adverbs, No. 6*

Willingly

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Matthew 3:13-17 (NIV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

This passage just read for us, Matthew, Chapter 3:13-17 is our text today. You're welcome to turn there if you would.

The position of our church is that we receive Scripture, the Bible, as the authoritative Word of God: infallible and offering all that we need for salvation and for knowing how to live a God-pleasing, sanctified life. Now, between us, we may disagree on how we interpret this or that detail or phrase, or how this or that Greek or Hebrew word might best be translated. But we receive the Bible's content and authority in faith and confidence.

Now, some people do not. Some people feel free to challenge the authenticity of this or that account in Scripture, which I would strongly counsel against, since history proves how quickly that can lead to a destructive denial of Scriptural authority.

I point to what's happening with our friends in the United Methodist denomination as an example of how quickly people can become the evaluators of Scripture instead of allowing Scripture to evaluate them.

Still, some do embrace that practice, and they have accused believers through the centuries of *inventing* stories here or there, maybe of some miraculous healing or some other divine act, in order to enhance certain aspects of the Bible's message.

However, even if one were inclined to challenge the authenticity of certain Scriptures, one would never seriously question that of this particular passage, because no Christ-follower of some past age would ever invent and insert an account that has proven so difficult to explain or interpret as this one has.

Put something in that very obviously proves your point, but don't put something in that raises more questions than it answers — as this passage has with Bible scholars ever since the earliest Church fathers.

Several things make this passage challenging.

For instance, we understand baptism to be a practice having to do with the forgiveness of sin —

after all, John was very clearly baptizing those who were repentant.

But Jesus wouldn't require that, of course, since His life was sinless. So why does He do this?

Along those same lines, it's hard for us who baptize in the name of Jesus to imagine Jesus subjecting Himself to be baptized by John, or in the name of someone, anyone, else.

And the fact is that even John felt that tension, to the point that he tries to talk Jesus out of it, as verse 14 there describes, when John says to Jesus, "**You need to baptize me — I don't need to baptize you.**"

Yet Jesus replies in a way that apparently satisfies John, saying (verse 15), "**Let it be so now; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**"

But what does that mean? Scholars through the ages have debated it.

The key seems to involve two terms that Jesus includes in His response that come up over and over again in Matthew's gospel: *fulfillment* and *righteousness*.

Of course, Jesus didn't need to be baptized in order to be righteous or to fulfill His own righteousness. He just was righteous — baptized or not.

And although it would seem that "fulfill" would mean something happening that would satisfy a greater Scriptural mandate, there is no verse or text in the Bible that requires the Messiah to be baptized.

So why did all this happen? Why was Jesus baptized?

It seems to me it happened because Jesus' baptism reveals or displays *His posture of willing submission to God*. It shows Jesus' character of being willingly obedient — in several ways.

First of all, in being baptized, Jesus is taking on the commitment to obey the law, which was something John was calling for, and certainly something required of the Messiah.

Jesus, here, was volunteering Himself to live a life under the authority of God's ways and standards. He was publicly entering into that commitment *willingly*, you see, and not under any compulsion. It was His choice and He was choosing His life's path.

By being baptized, Jesus is also willingly fulfilling the Old Testament pattern and predictions about the Messiah.

He was, again, volunteering to live in such a way as to fulfill all that had been said, all that had been predicted about what the Messiah to come would be.

He knew the prophecies: He knew what would come to Him through this role — this task, and He took that upon Himself *willingly*.

Also, Jesus in engaging with John here, is fulfilling the Old Testament in introducing Himself as

the Messiah to the nation of Israel. This was a prophetic moment in a grand scale, you see?

Now, there are times when we feel compelled of God to do something or act in a certain way, and we do so, but even afterward, we might wonder if we heard Him correctly or if we missed His voice.

John may not have fully understood Jesus' rationale before, or even during, the actual baptism, but there was no mistaking that what they did was God's will afterward, since even while Jesus was coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit visibly came upon Jesus and God the Father's affirming and endorsing voice was heard - just as was predicted - several times.¹

In submitting Himself to being baptized, Jesus also willingly exemplifies the servant-righteousness of which the prophets spoke, placing Himself beneath another's authority and control.

And along with that, in being baptized, Jesus willingly identifies with Israel's righteous remnant, reinforcing the fact that though Jesus had no sin, His ministry would still be to the lowly, repentant people.²

So, all this to say, you see: Jesus' baptism (Jesus being baptized by John) shows us the sort of willingness that following God - pleasing God, and doing God's will - requires.

Saying "yes" to God is a decision, a choice, we make.

God does not force people, through His divine power, to choose Him.

God does not force people follow Him.

God does not force people to obey Him.

Because God does not force people to love Him.

Why? Because God deals in what is real, and forced love is not real. It is not true.

Compelled love, forced love, is based on a lie.

Just as it is in human relationships, so forced love between us and God is artificial. It's not real. It's quite like pornography, or taken to the extreme, even rape.

It's artificial and because of that, utterly unsatisfying, and God does not engage in those ways.

Of course, God very much *wants* our love. He *wants* us to love Him, but in order for it to be real, we must give it to Him willingly, just as He offers His love to us willingly.

Anything less is just a meaningless simulation.

And there is no redemption in simulation.

God never deals in the counterfeit. God does not mock, nor can He be mocked.

He knows the real from the fake.

He can tell the willing from the grudging.

The willing are the ones like Jesus, who gladly submitted to baptism if for nothing else, then for the sake of pleasing God His Father.

¹ Isaiah 11:1-2, 42:1, Psalm 2:7

² Turner, David. *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 62.

The willing are also the ones like John, who while not even really understanding it willingly agreed to baptize Jesus simply because Jesus said, "This is what we need to do."

Doing what God asks us to do, and doing so not grudgingly or reluctantly or resentfully, but *willingly*.

That's the way of real love. That's how mature love responds.

Love is about what we do - love is a choice. We choose to love.

But mature love is about *how* we do it.

Love is to do what God asks.

Growing, deepening love is to do what God asks, even when it doesn't make sense.

Mature love is to do so quickly, humbly, willingly.

That's how we can know our love for Him is real, because that's the example - that's the way of Jesus.

You see, God forced exactly none of us to be here today - to come and worship Him.

God does not drag anyone out of bed.

God does not take us by our collar and sit us down and force us to read our Bibles nor to do our devotions.

God does not push us to our knees for prayer.

God did not put his hand on our head and shove us under the water of our own baptisms.

God does not do that, because that is not real.

We choose to be baptized. We choose to walk in the way of Jesus, just as we choose all those other things.

We choose to love God, and since loving God means obeying Him, we choose to obey - willingly, as Jesus did.

Are you doing that in your life?

Are you growing, maturing, in your relationship with God?

Are you loving Him willingly?

This would be a great day to begin doing that. If you'd like to say that to the Lord, if you'd like to take that step and make that promise, would you pray along with me here:

"God, I no longer want my life to just be about giving you the minimum - and at times reluctantly. I want to give myself and all about me to you *willingly* - as Jesus did, in all that He did. I want our love to be as real as can be, so will you help me? Will you give me the love I need, even to love You with all I am? Help me to love you as you want me to.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart*

Benediction: May each of us receive in these days a new measure of His Spirit, who empowers us to choose to Love Him and to respond to Him *willingly* - at every turn - with all that we are.