Book 43

Sunday January 13, 2002

FULFILLING RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 3:13-17

There are people who search all over the world in exotic places and strange religious movements trying to find the sacred or the holy; people who want to experience the presence and love of God. These same people frequently miss the Spirit of God where they live and in everyday ordinary commonplace events. Jesus said, "The Spirit of God is in the midst of you, within you and among you." He also said, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also."

The Apostle Paul wrote, "God is not far from any one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being."

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas which reminds us each year that we can find God in the commonplace, in the ordinary. The shepherds found God in a baby in a manger. The Wise Men who came searching for him, found the baby not in Jerusalem, where they first looked and where some of the readers of the prophet Isaiah thought they might find the Messiah. After all, Isaiah was sure that one day Jerusalem would again become a center of productivity and prosperity, a place of international trade. He imagined that nations would

come to its light and kings to the brightness of its dawn. So naturally a new king would be there.

Maybe the Wise Men had heard of Isaiah's dream and so that's why they first went to Jerusalem with their spices, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Here they would certainly find the new king of peace and prosperity. In addition, Jerusalem was the place where the holy temple of God was built.

But as you remember from the story of the Wise Men in Matthew's account, when Herod the king heard of the Wise Men's search, he was scared. Even rumors of a new king are always a threat to the old king and the establishment. So in his

panic, Herod quickly arranged a meeting with the leading Old Testament scholars and said to them, "Tell me about Isaiah's vision. What's all this business about camels, gold, frankincense and myrrh and a new king being born?" The scholars told him, "You have the wrong text. And the Wise Men who came to you are using the wrong text. Isaiah's vision will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy. In that picture, the urban elites can recover their former power and prestige and nothing will really change, but that's not how it's going to happen."

Herod didn't like what he heard, so he asked, "What's the alternative vision?" And the scholars told him about Micah's prophecy (Micah 5:2-4). "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is of old..."

This is the voice of a different kind of hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and large arenas, centers of finance and urban achievements. It anticipates an alternative future, as yet unaccomplished. Micah envisions a leader who will bring peace and well-being to his people, not by political ambition and power and wealth, but by attentiveness to the practices that

make for righteousness.

So the Wise Men left Jerusalem and found the baby in a house in Bethlehem. It reminds me of Elijah, who in the darkest time of his life was hiding in a cave and thought God had completely forgotten and deserted him. There he discovered God not in the earthquake, or in the fire, but in a "still small voice," or as some translators prefer to translate from the Hebrew, "in a still deep silence."

In today's Bible story from Matthew's gospel, we meet Jesus as an adult. In Matthew's story, we have heard nothing about Jesus since his parents returned from Egypt when he was only a young

child and again settled in Nazareth. Now as an adult, he meets John the Baptist and he asks John to baptize him. At first, John the Baptist is reluctant. He said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Then Matthew tells us, as do the other gospel writers when they relate the story of the baptism of Jesus, "When he had been baptized and came up from the water, the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him and he heard a voice that said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom

I am well pleased.'"

Nothing earth-shaking. The persons who were there and witnessed the event saw nothing out of the ordinary. Later Jesus described it like a dove descending on him, a kind of quiet confident assurance that God was with him and that he was with God. That's the kind of assurance I'm sure you want. The Bible story here is not talking about some kind of magic which automatically makes everything all right in an instant. What the gift of God's Spirit, God's presence or that which we often call the grace of God does, is to show you that you have been created in God's image, that it is good for you to live; that life is a blessing; that life is truly

good, wonderful, even when you are feeling at the same time that there are many things clustering around you which are not good.

To put it another way, the gift of God's grace that came to Jesus and can come upon you like a dove, does not cure all your diseases, take away all your problems, transform all your children into winners, or send you soaring into success. The gift of God's grace, or God's assuring presence, is rather an amazing power to look everyday life full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, life's unfairness, and yet feel and know in your deepest being that life is meant to be good in God's creation. The winds of God's grace are always

blowing, but you have to raise the sail or broaden the sail. But how do you do that? Let's return to the story of the baptism of Jesus for the answer.

In the story two things take place; the Spirit is described as descending like a dove, which is to say, it descended quietly and unobtrusively: and second Jesus experiences the assurance that God is with him. The most significant point is that both of these things happened in the event of the baptism. You will remember that John the Baptist was at first reluctant to baptize Jesus, but he agreed to do so when Jesus told him "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Here's what I believe Jesus meant with that last statement, "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." You begin to fulfill righteousness when you faithfully carry on the practices that feed your spirit and thereby increase your faith. When you are faithful in the practices of your faith, your faith increases and you are more open to the Spirit of God descending on you like a dove.

It's true in most areas of life. Here's an example from athletics. In a study done by sociologist Daniel F. Chambliss, entitled, THE MUNDANITY OF EXCELLENCE, Dr. Chambliss reports on a three year empirical study of excellent swimmers. He discovered that the major difference between

swimmers who win Olympic medals and those who don't is not talent, but the care and consistency with which Olympic swimmers engage in the mundane activities that prepare them for competition.

To be sure, there are natural differences in ability that we typically identify as talent. But Chambliss believes that when we see the full flowering of someone's careful practices, we attribute that achievement to "talent" because we are not remembering the years of practice and the cultivation of habits and techniques that come together to constitute excellence.

He writes: "Of course there is no secret; there is only the doing of all those little things, each one done correctly, time and time again, until excellence in every detail becomes a firmly ingrained habit, an ordinary part of one's everyday life."

We learn from other excellent athletes, performers and artists about the centrality of this attention to detail, habit and the doing of "ordinary things" day by day. This is as true of Michael Jordan as of Isaac Stern, of Cal Ripken, Tiger Woods as of Dorothy Hamill. Whether it was shooting endless free throws, or practicing scales, taking ground balls, or focusing on school figures, their

excellence was shaped by disciplined attention to the little things.

Yet this is one of the most difficult things to teach to beginners wanting to become athletes, musicians, artists or scholars. A man told me that he coaches a basketball team of 9 - 11 year old boys. He said they never want to practice on the basics, they want to scrimmage so they can show off their three-pointers or their spectacular "Michael Jordan moves." It is difficult to help them understand Jordan's commitment to the mundane tasks of repetition, discipline and practice.

Obviously, he said, some of you boys on the team

have more athletic ability than others. But he is also acutely aware that some of them with a lot of natural ability won't ever develop that ability, whereas some others, those who put in the effort will likely do much better over time.

Commitment to the little things is crucial to the religious life as well. We do not often think in those terms. We are more likely to focus on the importance of dramatic conversions, overwhelming encounters with God and powerful moments of prayer. We search for peak experiences and fear that some people have a talent for the religious life, a talent that we are somehow missing.

Kathleen Norris writes in one of her books, "In the life of faith....as well as in our most intimate relationships with other people, our task is to transform the high romance of conversion, the fervor of a religious call, into daily commitment; into the sort of friendship that transcends infatuation and can endure all things. Our desire is to love God and each other, in stable relationships that, like any good marriage, remain open to surprises and receptive to grace."

Jesus knew that his and our receptivity to grace, to experiencing God's loving presence is frequently shaped by our commitment to the mundane. In that way we "fulfill all righteousness." In the Lord's

Prayer we are asked to pray for our "daily bread," not for a grand banquet gourmet meal. Jesus taught us not to be anxious about tomorrow.

The alternative vision of the Christian life in contrast to much of the popular culture of feverish activities, consumerism and self-worship, is marked by tending to the daily activities of work, worship, rest and caring for others. These activities when taken together comprise faithfulness to God.

Kathleen Norris writes a few pages later, "It is a paradox of human life that in worship as in human love, it is in the routine and the everyday that we

find the possibilities for the greatest transformation." It can be found in such little things as a family committing itself to eating at least one meal together a few times a week with no interruptions.

It all begins in the symbolism of the sacrament of Baptism when we promise to renounce sin and evil and become "follower's of the way." This "following of the way," includes many mundane activities that are done correctly, time and time again, until excellence in every detail becomes a firmly ingrained habit, an ordinary part of one's everyday life.

Although we are baptized only once, there needs to

be a continual remembering and renewing of those baptismal vows. They remind us that there is an alternative way to living in this world.

When we remember and renew those baptismal vows, when we pay attention to and practice the many mundane activities of faithful living, God's promise is experienced again as it was by Jesus following his baptism. God says to each one of us, "You are my child, created in my image. I want the best for you and for every human being."

There are so many people who need to hear that assurance from God. I meet people all the time who tell me that they have the feeling that they are

locked in a car going full speed down a steep hill with the steering wheel locked and no brakes.

I meet others who describe themselves as "cliff people." They tell me that their lives are lived in fear as if they are on a small ledge half-way up a steep cliff and they are afraid to move. They are hanging onto the side of the cliff with their fingers and feel as if they no longer have the strength to hold on.

To people like these and to every one of you who has lost touch with God's good intentions for your future, you can experience the gift of God's grace. It's there waiting to descend on you like a dove.

It's a gift of forgiveness, power and hope and you will most often experience it in the mundane activities of faithful day to day living.

One final caution: you would be making a mistake if you expected everything to happen at once, instant, full blown. It may come in fragments, a nudge of power here and a ray of hope there. It may happen in one segment of your life at a time. Do not look for the whole story to be told in one chapter. The way is not always smooth without potholes and bumps. The good news is that God is traveling with you. Amen.