

Obedient faith

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Jesus descends into the baptismal waters as an opening act of messianic obedience. Obedience may not be the most glamorous of the Christian virtues, but it's the one that I'd like to highlight in this Sunday's account of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan.

Long ago, when I was in college, I went one night to hear a famous writer talk about her work. After her description of her life as a writer, we had the usual question-and-answer period. A fellow student asked, "How do you get in the mood to write?"

"In the mood?" she asked. "Well, let's see. I have breakfast, then I sit down at my typewriter, and I write. I'm a writer. That's what I do. I write."

And even though I didn't know much as a sophomore, I knew at that moment that I wanted the sort of life where the job was more important than me. I wanted to be obedient to something greater than my own self-interest.

Obedience, once honored by Victorian moralists, has fallen on hard times. It's been demoted to a backseat status in ethical discourse. Obey the rules? Be subservient to your ideals? This seems inferior moral motivation.

What ought we to do? Go with your feelings; be spontaneous. You are a naturally good person. Do what comes naturally. Who does anything out of dull obedience?

John Wesley had a vision of turning ordinary 18th-century English people into saints. Wesley knew enough about ordinary English people to know that it was too much to expect sainthood from people solely on the basis of their feelings. Therefore Wesley

taught them good habits, obedience as the path to holiness.

There is a letter by a dear, distressed soul to Wesley. She says that the fire for Jesus that once burned bright in her has now cooled. She no longer believes with the initial fervor that once characterized her faith. Wesley responds without one ounce of pastoral sensitivity, saying something to the effect of, Well madam, you say that you are arising at six to study scripture. You may be the sort of woman who needs to arise at five. You say that you visit in the prison once every week. You are obviously the sort of superficial gentlewoman who must visit the prisoners thrice a week.

No spiritual handholding, no exhortation to dig down within. Just “Obey the rules!” Do as you have been taught, and faith will come to you. So Wesley defines the new birth mainly in terms of life transformed through obedience.

Have you ever been truly in love with someone? If you have, you’ll know what I’m talking about; if you haven’t, I’m not a good enough poet to describe it for you. But have you ever been so in love that you find yourself doing all sorts of things, many things that you would never have done on your own, things which really bring you very little enjoyment in themselves, all because they reflect the wishes of the one whom you love? I know people who will sit through a football game, even though they are philosophically opposed to violence. I know people who willingly submit themselves to the opera, not because of the opera but in loving obedience to someone they love.

Whatever faithful victories we may achieve in life are so transient. Day-to-day spiritual vitality depends on so many contingencies you can’t control. So your goodness, your relationship to God, has got to rest on something more than evanescent feelings. What you need is something to keep you in faith even when you don’t feel like it. There are too many good reasons—reasons having to do with the nature of human self-deception, reasons having to do with the nature of the Gospel—that you need not expect affirmation.

Let us take the obedience of Jesus, in his baptism and in his cross, as our model. Let us be obedient to the demands of faith in order thereby to have faith.