

Like many faithful parents, I read a children's Bible to my child.
 I like to use the SPARK Bible,
 an ELCA Bible that does a good job compressing stories to their essence,
 and also it's got funny pictures.
 Well, one day, before she could talk,
 I was reading the story of Jesus' baptism
 to my daughter,
 never having read it from the SPARK Bible before.
 And well, let me just read the opening of the SPARK Bible version
 to you now like I did that day:

While John was saying this, Jesus appeared. He asked John to baptize him. But John wasn't so sure.

*"What? Me baptize YOU? I think it should be the other way around!"
 John said.*

But Jesus insisted, "Do it, John! God does amazing things in baptism!"¹

It's funny, right?

"Do it, John!"

No one expects Jesus to say that, or at least, to *sound* like that.

But I *love* this Jesus' "Do it, John!"

because it gets at how much John the Baptist *didn't* want to baptize Jesus!

"Do it, John!" illustrates John's

hesitation

and *resistance*

and *reluctance*.

Matthew's version carefully records this reluctance
 in a little conversation between John and Jesus before the baptism.

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan,
 to be baptized by him.

John would have prevented him, saying,

'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"

1. SPARK Bible, p. 244, emphasis added

Other translations say that John
 “tried to deter him,”
 “tried to stop him,”
 even “forbade” Jesus.
 “Forbade” is the old-school King James translation,
 which also says that when John finally consented to do the baptism,
 “Then he *suffered* [Jesus]” in performing it.

What resistance! What reluctance!
 But why?
 Why does John resist baptizing Jesus?
 Why does John have to be *convinced* to do it?

My hunch
 is that John
 doesn’t think
 he’s worthy.
 He doesn’t believe he’s good enough,
 adequate, or acceptable for the task.

John identifies his own inadequacy;
 it’s right there in the text when he questions Jesus:
 “I need to be baptized by you,
 and do you come to me?”
 John doesn’t think he’s—*something*—enough to do it:
 either not capable enough
 or pure enough
 or spiritually accomplished enough
 or maybe not even faithful enough to baptize Jesus.
 John the Baptist hasn’t got the status,
 or maybe the experience,
 or perhaps not even the personal worth
 to baptize this atypical candidate,
 who is the Messiah,
 the Holy One of God,
 the one who’ll save the people from their sins,
 the one who’ll save John.
 With GOD being personally involved,

of course John's sense of inadequacy and unworthiness peaks, and makes him reluctant about this baptism.

John's reluctance illustrates some of our own reluctance about baptism.

There are times when we, too, may feel unsure about the hold of this ritual sacrament.

We may feel unworthy of the love it showers upon us.

Or that we are inadequate for its blessings of eternal life, and insufficient for the life of discipleship that baptism asks of us.

In this way, we can relate to John the Baptist's reluctance that day at the Jordan.

If John the Baptist's reluctance over a baptism with Jesus involved is also our hesitation over our own baptisms that involve Jesus, then Jesus' response to John is Jesus' response for us as well.

Jesus responds,

"Let it be so now."

Permit it. Suffer it. Believe it.

That is to say,

believe that you are worthy enough of this great gift.

Accept that you are adequate enough for God's grace.

Trust that you are enough in the eyes of God.

Jesus tells John to do the baptism because

"it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

He's not talking about doing it to fill some empty box of divine righteousness.

Jesus' response actually has nothing to do

with our personal or God's righteousness

or our standing before God.

Rather,

Jesus' response requests John's obedience

before a power that is so much greater than him.

Jesus is asking John to submit, to surrender,

to accept how the Kingdom, the Power, and the Promise of God

overshadow and exceed our human efforts.

"Do it, John!" Jesus says in the SPARK Bible,

to which he might also have added,

“You are not, after all, in control.
This is not, when it’s all said and done,
about what *you* can *do*.”

That response is Good News.
Because it means that God’s love for us given in baptism
doesn’t depend on our readiness or worthiness.
God’s choice of us to be disciples
does not depend on how well we pray or don’t pray.
Jesus’ solidarity with us
does not depend on what our job or social status is
or who we’re married to
or how our kids behave.

God’s grace is not about what *we do*
but about what God does *for us*.

Jesus’ gift of being born and suffering with us
does not depend on *us*.
God’s love is simply there.
Ready and waiting at the banks of the Jordan.
Born in a stable in the dark of night.
Dwelling in our hearts through nothing but faith alone.

The story of John and Jesus goes on to show
how we have already received divine approval.
The words from heaven at Jesus’ baptism
are the same words God utters at our baptism,
which are words of divine love, acceptance, and embrace:
“This is my son,”
or “This is my daughter,”
“my beloved,
with whom I am well pleased.”

And for us Christians,
no matter what lies the inner or outer voices of inadequacy and unworthiness
may say,
there is no higher declaration

than that of the Word of God,
with and alongside the water
in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it's odd to dwell on John the Baptist on Jesus' baptism day,
but I believe we should celebrate him and recognize his reluctance.
Because John's being deemed worthy to baptize Christ,
Jesus telling John that he's already enough to experience this great show of
God's love,
is also ours.
For today, again, like every day,
God is saying we are God's beloved.
Do it John!
Believe it, us!

AMEN.