

“Who, Me?”

“Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

*“You want me to commune you?”*

Serving as a worship assistant in our seminary’s chapel provided me with some of my best learning experiences during my years of education in Philadelphia. Serving as a sacristan taught me how to set up an altar and care for all the elements that are used when the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. Taking my turn as an assistant minister in chapel worship gave me practical experience in leading a congregation in the various services that took place throughout the week; these included Holy Communion, Morning and Evening Prayer, and Compline. One of the most memorable of these worship experiences was when I served as an assisting minister for Bishop William Jansen, who was the bishop of the local synod and was the guest preaching and presiding minister. I had only served as a worship assistant on a few occasions, and when I found out that I would be serving with the bishop I was extremely nervous, since I didn’t feel at all confident in my role. On the day of the service, I was glad that I was wearing an Alb because my knees were shaking from my anxiety! Thankfully, Bishop Jansen was a very kind, easygoing person who put all of us at ease, and as the service progressed, I became more comfortable before the congregation that packed the chapel. When it came time to distribute communion, I took my place as the subdeacon (the person who makes sure that the chalices are kept full); and when distribution was completed, we returned to the altar to communion the worship participants. The bishop gave communion to each of us, and then did something that shocked me: he turned to me and asked, “Jeff, will you please commune me?” I was dumbfounded; why was he asking *me* to give him communion? What business did a first-year seminarian have in sharing the Body and Blood of Christ with a bishop of the church? The bishop could see my anxiety and assured me that all was well, so I gave him the bread and wine along with the words *“the body of Christ, given for you; the blood of Christ, shed for you”*; but I still felt completely unqualified and unworthy of such an awesome responsibility.

I’ve often thought about this experience when I’m working with seminary interns who may at first feel inadequate or unworthy of leading worship in our congregation. While some parts of the service are reserved for an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament (including presiding at the Lord’s Supper), our liturgies are the “work of the people” in which all of us are welcome to use the gifts God has entrusted to us *“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”* (Ephesians 4:12). While we work to improve our skills in our various areas of service, all of us are called in baptism to serve and all are welcome to take part in the work of the Church.

In his response to Jesus’ presence on the banks of the Jordan River, John the Baptist appears to believe that he is also unworthy of what he is being asked to do: *“John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’”* (Matthew 3:14). John the Baptist plays a major role in the New Testament, appearing in all four Gospels as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of the voice that cries out *“in the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”* (Isaiah 40:3). John was a significant figure in his own right, a Jewish prophet with his own message and disciples who ran afoul of Herod Antipas and was imprisoned and executed by him. The movement founded by John continued not only after the baptism of Jesus but also after our Lord’s resurrection and the beginning of the Christian community:

- “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” – Matthew 11:2-3.
- “While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not ever heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” – Acts 19:1-5.

While Luke’s Gospel provides extensive details on John’s birth (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80), the Baptist appears abruptly in Matthew’s Gospel: *“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”* (3:1-2). His message of the coming of the kingdom of heaven continues Matthew’s theme of the incursion of God’s kingdom into this world in the most unexpected manner in the birth of a child in a manger in Bethlehem.

The description of John’s clothing and food serves to separate him from elegant society and to identify him with the wilderness that was to be the scene of eschatological renewal: *“Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.”* (3:4). Locusts were ritually clean food (*“Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind.”* – Leviticus 11:22). While his appearance and diet may have been startling to some people, it doesn’t seem to deter anyone from coming to him to receive the baptism he was offering: *“Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region beyond the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”* (3:5-6). Various ritual immersions and washings in Judaism may be served as a model for John’s baptism (*baptizo*, “to dip or immerse”); but John’s baptism was distinctive, a once-for-all baptism that sealed converts from the eschatological judgment to come.

John’s understanding of his own mission and baptism becomes clear when he contrasts his work with that of “the one who is to come”:

- “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” – 3:11.

This self-awareness of his “unworthiness” in comparison to the Coming One helps explain John’s reaction when *“Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.”* (3:13). This is the first time that the adult Jesus appears in Matthew’s Gospel, and the Evangelist offers no explanation as to why he has journeyed to the Jordan River nor why he presents himself to be baptized by John. Even though there has been no previous contact between the two, John recognizes Jesus as his superior, and without making any Christological confession tries to reverse the action that is about to take place: *“John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’”* (3:14). Who am I, John must have thought, to have the audacity to baptize the one who is the fulfillment of God’s promise of the Coming One, the Messiah? How can a sinful man like me preside over the baptism of one who is born without sin? How can I stand in a place superior to the at whose name *“every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:10-11)?

Jesus' response to John's reticence is the first time he speaks in Matthew's Gospel, authoritatively taking charge of his own baptism: *"But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'" (3:15).* "Righteousness" (*dikaiosyne*) means doing the revealed will of God and is one of the central themes of Matthew's Gospel (*"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* – 6:33). To "fulfill all righteousness" means to be obedient to the will of God, which includes the baptism of Jesus. Jesus uses the plural "us," linking Jesus and John together as partners in carrying out God's saving plan.

- "John yields because John has no choice. John yields because he realizes that the one to whom he must yield, Jesus, is now here. John protests that he is not worthy to baptize Jesus – we know all of his protestations in the gospel – but Matthew makes the point that it is not a question of merit but of the fulfillment of God's will." – Peter Gomes.

Even though he probably still feels unworthy to preside at Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist consents; and when Jesus had been baptized and comes out of the waters of the Jordan, Matthew reports that *"suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" (3:16-17).* The heavenly voice speaks the words of Scripture, signifying that Jesus is to be the Suffering Servant of God and only in this humble sense Messiah:

- "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'" – Psalm 2:7.
- "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." – Isaiah 42:1.

"This is" identifies Jesus to the crowd; it also indicates that the very Son of God is the obedient one who is baptized in the same waters as sinful humanity in obedience to the will of God that will lead him to the Cross (*"My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."* – 26:42).

- "Jesus is baptized not to repent of sins, for he is without sin, but to establish and give witness to a relationship that shows that he belongs to God and is called to do God's work in the world. He is baptized as a witness to God's claim upon him ... Baptism is the renewal of a relationship with God that began at creation. He is baptized to manifest both to heaven and to earth that he, Jesus Christ, is the means by which God will accomplish his will and work on earth." – Gomes.

In his baptism, Jesus is identified both as the Son of God and as the one who is the *"Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth."* (John 1:14). As he takes his place in the waters of the Jordan alongside all who had come to be cleansed and forgiven of their sins – some of whom were *"notorious sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence"* (Barbara Brown Taylor) – he begins a ministry in which Jesus will live among all people, including those who were considered outsiders or contemptible sinners. When he was criticized for being in the company of tax collectors and "sinners," Jesus declared that *"those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."* (Mark 2:17). When he enters Jericho, he chooses to dine in the home of Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector, proclaiming that *"today salvation has come to his house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."* (Luke 19:9-10). The one who we confess is *"fully God, begotten of the Father in eternity"* (*Small Catechism*), fulfills all

righteousness in taking the form of a servant so that he might become the one who will redeem all humanity so that all may know they are children of God:

- "... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." – Philippians 2:6-8.

On the day we remember the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are called to remember our own baptisms, the day when through water and the Word we were *"reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ."* Most of us were brought here as infants, lovingly held by parents and godparents as we were baptized according to Christ's command *"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 28:19) and were identified as a *'child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.'* We were baptized not because we were worthy to receive this Sacrament or had fulfilled a list of prerequisites in order to have it bestowed upon us; in fact, there is nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy to receive this gift. Baptism is a pure gift of God, which God gives to us *"out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all."* (Small Catechism).

- "Thus we can see what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains until we pass out of this misery into eternal glory." – Large Catechism.

The question, then, should never be "who, me?" for in Baptism all of us are identified alongside Jesus as beloved sons and daughters of God and called to follow our Lord Jesus Christ in the path of servanthood. We are worthy to serve in Christ's name because we bear the name of our Saviour, who lived among so that we might know that God is with us always and calls us to share the good news with all persons. It didn't matter that I was a first-year seminarian standing alongside a bishop of the church in the Philadelphia chapel; I was worthy to share the Lord's Supper with him because I was a baptized child of God, called along with all God's baptized people to *"serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth"* (ELW Affirmation of Baptism).

*Who, me?*

Yes, you! You are a child of God, and you are worthy to serve all people in the name of the one who *"called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9).

Amen.