

Righteous Obedience

The Rev. Amy Spagna

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Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:14-21

What comes into your mind when you hear the word "obedience"?

I would bet for most of us, it's getting our beloved pet dogs to behave as we want them to. In fact, if you Google the word, among the very first things which comes up in the results is "training for dogs." The American Kennel Club describes "obedience training" as "essential for setting up right behaviors and expectations" as soon as possible after a new dog comes home. They recommend using any number of positive reinforcement techniques, and emphasize that these exercises are important for any dog to learn how to interact successfully with humans, especially for "high energy breeds that need mental stimulation as well as physical exercise."¹ Of course, as a cat owner, the very concept of teaching any cat to stay or roll over is anathema – they mostly do whatever they want and could care less about pleasing the humans.

Obedience in the context of the Church is quite a bit different. As a concept, it often appears in connection with placing oneself under Christ's authority, and/or within that of a specific role in the community we call the Church. Obedience is not simply saluting and following orders. It is rooted in trust of the God who judges and raises up, and in God's Christ, who has come not to be served but to serve.²

That ideal is all over the Prayer Book, and most especially in the context of rites which require making some sort of promise or vow. For example, Older forms of the

¹ "Basic Obedience Training for Puppies: Where To Start." <https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/training/basic-obedience-training-for-your-dog/> [accessed January 5, 2023].

² Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Future of the Christian Church* (New York: Morehouse, 1970), 37-38.

marriage service require the bride to promise to obey the groom. Candidates for baptism, confirmation, and reception, and their sponsors, are asked if they will promise to follow and obey Jesus as Lord. Those who are being ordained all take some form of a vow of obedience. Priests and deacons vow to respect and be guided by the pastoral direction and leadership of their bishops; and bishops themselves promise to obey Christ and serve in his name. You'll even hear the idea in one of our Eucharistic prayers: "He offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world." If nothing else, we are meant to learn these two things from the Prayer Book: one, is it not only not about us; and two, we don't function apart from God's own authority. And as we heard a few weeks ago in the story of how Joseph was convinced not to dismiss Mary quietly, not going along with the program is not really a choice in the end. One either does what God asks, or, as Jonah did when God asked him to go to Nineveh to demand its citizens repent or else, one spends a lifetime fighting it, and often with a less than ideal outcome.

The writer of Matthew's gospel calls such this practice of going along with the divine will, "righteous." Matthew is building on the Jewish tradition he comes out of, where such righteousness "is not limited to moral uprightness. More importantly, righteousness is a relational concept. For example, Abraham 'believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6). Abraham was righteous because he trusted God, not because he was morally perfect. Human righteousness entails being put in a right relationship before God, as Habakkuk states, 'the righteous

live by their faith' (Habakkuk 2:4). God's righteousness, then, is expressed in [God's] covenantal faithfulness and salvation for Israel."³

While Matthew is firmly grounded in this tradition, he pushes the concept of righteous obedience out a little further. Throughout his gospel, righteous people are those who do what God asks, regardless of social conventions or how it makes them look in the eyes of the rest of the world. That it would be weird for John to baptize someone who was his superior, and not the other way around, is John's chief objection to going through with it. For someone who doesn't seem to care about the gossip stemming from his hanging out on the river bank, wearing a camel skin and subsisting on bugs and honey, to balk at this request is serious. John knows who Jesus is. He probably never thought he'd come face to face with the person he'd been talking about, much less have him ask John to baptize him in the very same way John baptized everyone who came to his place along the Jordan. Jesus' words to him, "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15, NRSV) are meant to reassure John that it is OK. God is asking this, of both of them, so it is an act which does not so much demonstrate their righteousness as it does God's. Through it, Matthew reminds us that "[Jesus'] righteousness is not primarily about being right but doing what God wants and that is never unconnected from God's saving, compassionate purpose."⁴

Let me repeat that: righteousness is not primarily about being right, but doing what God wants. In other words: this is not all about us, and yet it is. When Jesus

³ Diane G. Chen, "Commentary on Matthew 3:13-17."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-313-17-6> [accessed January 2, 2023].

⁴ William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Baptism of Jesus."
<https://billloader.com/MtBaptismJesus.htm> [accessed January 2, 2023].

submits to God's will, whether it's here or on the cross, it's not about him – it's about God, and God's purposes for the world. Likewise when we obey Christ's commandment to go and do likewise, it's ultimately about God. Peter, with his marvelous speech in Acts 10, is among the first to realize that, and to act on it. Centuries later, St. Benedict, the great fount of monastic wisdom whose Rule is still widely used today, devoted an entire chapter of the Rule to the role and necessity of practicing Christlike obedience within the context of the community. In her commentary on the Rule, Sr. Joan Chittister writes,

"There is an urgency in the Rule of Benedict. The hallmark of obedience for Benedict, in fact, is immediacy. Monasticism is a process, true, but it is lived out in a million little ways day after day. Most of all, perhaps, it is lived out in obedience, the ability to hear the voice of God in one another – in the members of the community, both old and young; in the person we married and all whose aphorisms we know by now; in underlings and children; in bold parents and boring in-laws. This voice of God in the demands of community life is not something to be dallied with or contended with or speculated about or debated.

"The necessary question, of course, is how is it that a rule that purports to deal with spiritual life can possibly put so much stock in the human dimensions of community... If this is a life centered on the call of God, then why so much attention to the human?"

"The answer of course is that the human is the only place we can really be sure that God is. It is so easy to love the God we do not see but it is so much more sanctifying to serve the God we learn to see in others.

"The self-giving of real obedience is very clear to Benedict. When we follow the voice of the ones who call us to higher service, we put down our own concerns, allow ourselves to be led by the sights of another, threat our own best interests with a realized grasp. We empty ourselves out so that the presence of God can come in, tangible and present and divinely human."⁵

And when we come up out of the waters of engaging in this self-emptying, we too will hear the proclamation: This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

⁵ Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2014), 67-68.