

Fulfilling All Righteousness: The Humility of Love

Fr. John Konkle

(Adapted from a homily given on January 6, 2023)

The Gospel for Holy Theophany describes an encounter between our Lord and St. John the Forerunner in which Jesus wants John to baptize him and John wants to avoid doing so. “Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?’ (Mt 3:13-14). And yet, when John tries to avoid baptizing Jesus, our Lord responds: “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt 3:15)—a very unusual statement, occurring nowhere else in Scripture. Many of the holy fathers understand Jesus to mean that he is fulfilling the law. Indeed, two chapters later in the Gospel, Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Mt 5:17-18).

What, then, does it mean to fulfill the law? Jesus answers this question in the ensuing verses by introducing the peculiar linguistic construction, “You have heard that it was said . . . , but I say to you . . .” (Mt. 5:21-48). His teachings are familiar: the prohibition against murder is extended to the calling to make peace with our adversary (5:21-26); the prohibition against adultery is extended to the calling to have chaste vision (5:27-30); the prohibition against breaking oaths is extended to the calling to be always true to our word (5:33-37); the permission to divorce is revoked except in cases of sexual immorality (Mt 5:31-32); the prohibition limiting retribution to an eye for an eye is extended to the calling to respond kindly to those harming us (5:38-42).

If we understand these texts as expressing what the fulfillment of the law looks like in practice, then we can say that, in general, prohibitions to do wrong are replaced by / extended to / fulfilled in the requirement to do good even in the face of being wronged. Indeed, Jesus completes his teaching in this way: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (5:43-44). The law, as St. Paul explains, is fulfilled in love (Rom 13:10).

Jesus is articulating a progression from law . . . to righteousness . . . to love, a progression that he sees as a seamless garment, a seed growing into the tree of life. Thus, the law, rightly understood, has its fulfillment in a righteous life, as described in the several examples he provides, and these righteous acts are nothing less than concrete manifestations of love. Every command is a command to love in this or that particular way. While this instruction given in the Sermon on the Mount is directed at us, Christ’s disciples, revealing to us the life to which we are called, they also describe the life that Jesus himself lived to perfection. In short, we are called to live a

Christ-like life, the life of the Righteous One, the life of love. In this way, we see what St. Paul means by teaching that the law is a tutor that leads us to Christ (Gal 3:24). Christ, as God, is love (1Jn 4:8). The law, properly practiced, expresses itself as a righteous life, which in turn is simply the manifestation of love, which is Christ himself.

Love, as we have seen, is not a sentimental notion, an affection, or any other sort of rosy bliss. Love is the self-offering, self-sacrificing, self-emptying actions for the good of others as was prophesied of the coming Messiah, the Righteous One, in Isaiah:

O Lord, who has believed our report, and to whom was the arm of the Lord revealed? We proclaimed His presence as a Child as a Root in a thirsty land. He had no form or glory, and we saw Him; and He had no form or beauty. But in comparison to all men, His form was lacking in honor. He was a man in suffering and knew how to bear sickness. His face was turned away, and He was dishonored and not esteemed. *He bears our sins and suffers for us*, yet we considered Him to be in pain, suffering, and ill-treatment. *But He was wounded because of our lawlessness, and became sick because of our sins. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His bruise we are healed.* All we like sheep have gone astray. Man has gone astray in his way, and the Lord delivered Him over for our sins. Although He was ill-treated, He opened not His mouth. He was led as a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb is silent before his shearers, so He opens not his mouth. *In His humiliation* His judgment was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth, and *because of the lawlessness of My people He was led to death.* I will appoint evil men for His burial and rich men for His death, because He committed no lawlessness, nor was deceit found in His mouth. ... *The Righteous One ... shall bear their sins.* (Is 53:1-11; lxx; emphasis added)

It is Christ himself who suffers on account of our wrong doings. The harm we do to others, as well as to ourselves, is a harm that he willingly takes upon himself; he carries our sins without retaliating, but rather in the humility of his humiliation brings healing to us. These, and many other texts from the Psalms and the Prophets, foreshadow St. Paul's succinct teaching in his Epistle to the Philippians: "Christ Jesus, while being in the form of God, ... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, *He humbled Himself* and became obedient *to the point of death*, even the death of the cross" (Phil 2:5-8). This is *the humility of love*.

Understanding that love is non-existent without humility opens the door to seeing our Lord's baptism as the prefiguring of Great and Holy Friday, Saturday, and Pascha Sunday. In baptism one dies, is buried under the waters, and is raised to new life since death is unable to hold Life captive. But baptism is not *self-administered*. Someone else baptizes. And now we see why Jesus says to the Forerunner, "It is fitting for *us* to fulfill all righteousness (Mt 3:15). Jesus does

not baptize himself; he is baptized *by John*. When John places his hands on Jesus to plunge him under the waters, he is prefiguring all our sins being placed on him to plunge him to his death—nailing him to the cross and burying him in the tomb. We all, with John, crucify and bury him—not because we are stronger than he is, for no one takes his life from him, but he lays it down for us (Jn 10:18). Rather, he allows us to crucify him by taking upon himself all our sins and the consequences of those sins, which ultimately is death. He does so by emptying himself, allowing himself to be sacrificed, offering himself to us as the sinless one who became sin so that we might become the righteous of God in him (2 Cor 5:21). This is the humility of love. This is the fulfillment of all righteousness, the true and proper fulfillment of the law.

The life of love as the fulfillment of righteousness is made available to us insofar as we are willing to be baptized with him—not to die alone in our sins, but to die with him. For he does not take our sins from us by force, but willingly receives them from us if we are willing to give them to him. It is here that we see the great humility of the Forerunner. We know from the Gospel of John that the Forerunner recognizes Jesus for who he is; when he sees Jesus he announces to his disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). John knows he is not worthy to baptize the Messiah for he is not even worthy to loosen the straps of his sandals (Jn 1:27). Later, when John’s disciples are leaving him to follow Jesus, instead of expressing envy he rejoices and says that Jesus “must increase and I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). In all John’s activity, he manifests a humble posture, knowing who he is in light of his relationship to Jesus. He is not the light, but bears witness to the light (Jn 1:6). He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord” (Jn 1:23; Is 40:3). John’s life is characterized by humility, pointing the way to Jesus as the Christ.

Thus, when John replies, “I need to be baptized by you” (Mt 3:14), he is expressing a profoundly humble awareness of who he is relative to Jesus. He wants to place himself below his master, the Messiah, not above him. And yet for Jesus to manifest his humble love, John must baptize him. John’s baptism is for the confession of and repentance for sins; Jesus is the sinless one. John’s baptism is the image of death; Jesus is the author of Life. Jesus’ humble love offered to John, and through John to us, is received by the humbling reality of placing our sins upon him knowing that this brings about his death. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who takes away our sins, does so by allowing us to baptize him, to crucify him. Elsewhere John’s humility is expressed as facing the reality of who he is relative to Christ; here John’s humility is expressed by facing the reality of his sins being carried by the sinless one. The Savior’s humble love is received by the humbling and horrifying exchange of our sins for his love.

Death, we come to experience, cannot hold the Author of life. The baptized come forth from the waters and the dead rise from the tombs. The reception of his humble love infuses us to live the life he lived, the life which fulfills all righteousness—not by our strength, but by his life manifest in us. Thus, humble love is not merely a one time, baptismal event but a way of life. In Jesus we

see him continually fulfilling his ministry not to be served but to serve (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45)—a practice which is most vividly exemplified at the mystical supper when he does not regard himself superior to his disciples but descends from the table, girds himself as a servant, and washes the disciples' feet as a servant would, thereby placing the disciples in the humiliating and humbling state that John was in at the Lord's baptism, being cleansed by the only one who is clean (Jn 13:1-17).

That the life of humble love is made available to us to be lived out in practice is beautifully expressed in events surrounding our celebration of Holy Nativity just two weeks ago. First we see Joseph, who, *being a righteous man*, wants to break ties with Mary secretly when he finds out that she is with child (Mt 1:18-19). The law would have allowed him to make a public spectacle of her and to require an appropriate recompense (Ex 22:16-17), and he could have responded to this (perceived) harm with the harm enacted by the letter of the law. It is precisely Joseph's righteousness, however, that engenders his response of humble love. And it is this same humble love that makes him receptive to the angel's revelation that Mary carries in her womb a Child conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Mary herself, the Mother of our Lord, is remembered the day after Nativity for she is the one who responded to the Archangel Gabriel's annunciation with the words, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). She voluntarily accepts the role of a servant, and in this expression of humble love receives into her very womb the one who is himself humble love—an act that is only the beginning of her self-sacrifice, a sacrifice which will culminate in her soul being pierced even as her Son's side is pierced (Lk 2:35).

Finally, on the second day after Nativity, we remember St. Stephen, the first to be martyred for following Christ. Stephen responded to his persecutors just as our Lord did when he was on the cross, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60). He fulfilled our Lord's words from the Sermon on the Mount, "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Mt 5:44). This is humble love, the life offered to all who are willing to respond in humility to Jesus' invitation to the Forerunner: It is fitting for *us* to fulfill all righteousness.