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The National Presbyterian Church

John the Baptist: Second Best?

John 1:19-34; 3:28-30

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons this fall and on into next year we are focusing on Jesus' life and Jesus' ministry as we read about it in the gospel according to St. John – one of the four accounts of Jesus' ministry that we have in the pages of scripture. If we go almost to the end of John's gospel, to the 20th Chapter and to the 30th Verse, John shares with us a wonderful little personal insight into how he put his gospel together and why he included the stories that he includes. This is what it says in John Chapter 20 and at Verse 30:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

In other words, John is saying that there were hundreds of stories out there. Some of them made it into the Bible some don't. Some are in the apocryphal gospels that have been found in recent years. There were lots of stories. Some written down. Some never written down. But John says, that he picked his top ten (or fifteen or twenty or whatever it may be) and he's sharing them with his readers. Sharing them with you and me so that in hearing these stories about Jesus and bringing our lives into those stories, so that our lives intersect with His, we might know that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and we might be the beneficiaries ... finding life, abundant life, life eternal, life everlasting, in His name.

I trust that as we read through this gospel together as we hear God's word preached, that this is what we will experience: that the Christ who lived so long ago will live in us, and that through this proclamation by the Holy Spirit he will touch us as he touched those who met him in flesh and blood.

This fall, to begin with, we'll be focusing in particular on specific people who met Jesus. And we begin this morning with the central figure of our passages of Scripture, the man to whom I referred earlier, about whom we have sung: John

the Baptist – who is baptizing great crowds of people in the Jordan River. And things seemed to be going really well for him. Except that up river, when we come across him, something new is beginning to happen. Jesus is also baptizing and John the Baptist's disciples are just a little bit upset – upset with Jesus. Jesus is upsetting the apple cart, and they are afraid that more and more people are going to go to Jesus and their boss is going to lose out. John the Baptist, who was the big guy, is going to lose out with this Jesus who is baptizing as well. So they share their fears and observations with John. But John just doesn't seem to care that much. In a competitive world, John doesn't seem to care that much.

We live, I think we all would acknowledge, in a highly competitive world, in a highly competitive environment. How do we handle that? Some of you know more about sports and sports writing than I do but back in the 1930s there was a sportswriter by the name of Grantland Rice, the dean of sportswriters then, who was the one who said that what matters is *“not that you won or lost but how you played the game.”* Heard that before? It's not whether you won or lost but how you played the game. And in saying this he was really picking up on the father of the Olympics Pierre deCoubertin who stated the 'Olympic spirit' when he said that the most important thing is *“not winning but taking part.”* And we say “Yes, that's how it ought to be, but in reality, the real world, the truth is better stated by neither of these two folks but by Vince Lombardy who said that *“winning isn't the main thing it is the – it's the only thing!”*

So here we are. We know what we ought to think and do with all these things, and we say about the ideal, “isn't that wonderful.” And then the reality hits home and we say “you know, we just love a winner.” We just love a winner . . . So we tune into all these reality TV shows (and there are more of them on television than ever before) which are based on competition and who is it who's going to win the big bucks? Who is going to become America's Idol or top model? Or win the great race or become the biggest loser? And we're looking for that winner who comes in first. Who remembers who comes in second? Once in a while we do. But generally we're looking for the winner.

Or we turn onto the Academy Awards and they fill it with all this stuff and we say get to the point I just want to know who has won. So you open the envelope and they say . . . “and the winner is” . . . and we wait for that. And the next day in the paper we have the lists of those who win and we browse through the list of the winners, not the losers but the winners.

This is the world in which we live. Once in a while we break with this. We love a sport. We'll watch it whether our team wins or loses (and I think some of us may support teams that aren't winning as much as they used to do!). Once in a while we do that. But overall, our society is one which focuses on winners. And I suspect of course that that has been the case in many societies throughout history.

So if I were to take us back out of this modern era back 2000 years to the time of Jesus in the first century Palestine and I were to ask the pollsters there this question I wonder what they would say:

- *Who are the winners in the religious environment, in the religious Academy Awards?*
- Who are the great teachers, the great preachers?
- Who will be the one who will have the lasting impact on others?

I wonder who would be among the nominees. I think there'd be some people we never heard of before, and some who we have heard of.

There would be in the 1st Century Palestine at least a number of rabbis who remain prominent in Judaism in the years and the centuries to come. *Hillel and Shamai and Aqiba, and Yohannan Ben Zakkai*, a really prominent rabbi of whom we probably have never heard; but in the 1st Century he's right up there. And they might have added *John the Baptist*.

And they might have added *Jesus*. But to begin with it is unlikely that Jesus would have made it to the top. If we were in the 1st Century looking at life from that perspective he's in the game, he's a nominee, but he's not necessarily at the top.

And we know this in particular because of the writing of the 1st Century historian, Jewish historian, Josephus, a Jew, not a Christian who writes about both Jesus and John the Baptist – and of the two, John the Baptist is clearly the most prominent. He gets the award in the 1st Century. This is what Josephus writes, outside of our Bible, about John the Baptist. He writes little about Jesus. It's John the Baptist who gets the press.

Now when many people came in crowds to John and were very greatly moved by hearing his words Herod feared that the great influence John had over the people might empower John to raise a rebellion for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise. That's how powerful he was. So Herod thought it best to put John to death. Get rid of him to prevent any mischief he might cause. Accordingly John was sent as a prisoner out of Herod's suspicious temper to a castle called Macherus and was there put to death.

Even this death, though, didn't end things for John's ministry. Throughout the 1st Century there were small groups of John the Baptist's followers throughout the ancient world. When the gospel came to different communities sometimes they found gatherings of John the Baptist followers there (Acts 19:22-7) – an influential figure in the 1st Century.

But what you and I know, of course, is that if we go out of that century and we take the long-term view we say "Well now who lasted for 20 centuries with an enormous impact?" Well we all know that it's Jesus who wins. It's Jesus who

wins. He's the one who does it. In the 1st Century not everybody could see that at all. Not everybody could see it. . . . BUT John the Baptist began to see it. He caught a glimpse of this. His disciples couldn't see it and they didn't want it to happen. They wanted their man, John the Baptist, to be first. They wanted him to be top. They wanted him to be the winner. And when this Jesus comes along and they begin to suspect that things may go against their man they are upset, and they try to get John the Baptist all worked up about this, *but he won't buy into it*. He's not into that kind of thing. He's running by a different set of principles and rules. And he actually tells them that he's quite happy. In fact the scripture says he's rejoicing, and that "*Jesus must, must increase while he, John the Baptist, must decrease.*" (John 3:30)

I hope you caught those words. They were read in our first scripture reading in John Chapter 3. They are powerful and amazing words: "*He, Jesus, must increase and I must decrease.*"

What kind of a person would say that? What kind of a person at the top of their game, with the chance of winning it all, would say, "Listen it doesn't bother me at all? Just doesn't bother, I could walk away from it. I'm quite happy for the spotlight to move from me and to shine on somebody else." And you look and you say, does this sound real? Is he faking it? And there is no faking of it. It is real for him. It is okay for him. Not for his friends, his disciples. But for John the Baptist it is just fine, just fine if he decreases and Jesus increases. Okay not to be first, or second or wherever. It's just not his concern.

So the question I'd really like us to think about today is this: *what's going on in John the Baptist which enables him to say this and to find joy in saying this, to find a life in which he is not threatened about his position?*

There are three things that come out of our scripture readings that I in particular would like to draw to your attention.

WINNING ISN'T THE ONLY THING. The first one is this: that John the Baptist quite clearly didn't think that winning was the only thing. It just wasn't in his psyche that winning was the only thing. He was able to get out of that rut, that dead end, because he had in his head an image which gave him peace about the matter.

We are given by our society all kinds of images which take away our peace. And they are coming at us again and again. So it's important that our minds contain images which satisfy, which help us to process what is going on. John the Baptist's image was of a wedding (3:29)

I don't know how many weddings you have been to. You may have been to too many weddings. Count them up -- they may be in the tens or the fifties or the

hundreds. I've been to lots and lots of weddings as a minister. Somebody might say 'well, you get paid to go!' That's okay. So, I've been to lots of weddings. *But I've only been to one wedding that was my wedding.* Just one that was my wedding and the other weddings I've enjoyed just as much and perhaps even more. I'm not even sure I can remember what went on at my wedding. But at other weddings well, we're free to enjoy the occasion, even though, and perhaps precisely because we are not the center. We say that it's the bride's day; it's the groom's day. And we're happy to be there celebrating this with them.

And John the Baptist says quite simply Jesus is the groom. He is the groom, and I'm happy to be there in the party with him. This is my place. I don't need to be the groom, I just don't need it. Jesus is, and that is okay.

So John the Baptist carries this image of this wedding with him and it gives him this peace at this basic level. He just doesn't need to win.

In fact it's as if Jesus needs him to be a guest at the wedding as much as he needs Jesus to be the groom, for the wedding to take place. It would be rather dull if you only had the couple there. Might be nice and sweet but it wouldn't be the party which most weddings are. You need the gang, you need each other but you only need the one couple in the middle. Only one is number one there.

And this is where we find our joy in finding some image, which says somebody else can be number one. I'm okay not to be number one. But not to be number one is not to be unimportant!

About 30 years ago United Technologies which makes all kinds of amazing gadgets, gizmos, helicopters and who knows what else, put this statement together to inspire their employees. They wrote this:

How important are you? More than you think.

A rooster minus a hen equals no baby chicks.

Kellogg minus a farmer equals no corn flakes.

If the nail factory closes what good is the hammer factory?

The pianist wouldn't have amounted to much if the piano tuner hadn't turned up.

A cracker maker will do better if there's a cheese maker.

The most skillful surgeon needs the ambulance driver who delivers the patient.

Just as Rogers needed Hammerstein you need someone and someone needs you.

Can't always be first. Indeed if you are, you might be in a place where you will lose your position and be afraid of that. We need one another. Winning is not, it is not the only thing.

WINNING IS NOT THE MAIN THING. It's not even the main thing. Something else is the main thing and John had a hold of this as well. *He knew what the main thing was, and that was his calling from God.* That's the main thing. Not our position or our rank, where we are in the ladder in the opinion of other people, but fulfilling our calling from God.

Remember our reading (John 1:19-23), in which people come and ask John the Baptist "Who are you?" And he keeps saying, I'm not this I'm not that I'm not the next thing I'm not the Messiah. There was a promise that Elijah the Prophet would come again I'm not Elijah. There was a promise that Moses would come again. I am not the prophet, I am not these things. But who are you? And then he says (1:23) "*I am the voice. That's it – I am the voice. The voice of one crying in the wilderness*". Not in the center, but in the wilderness, in the middle of nowhere. Prepare the way of the Lord. He was happy to be the voice. This was his calling. He was sure about it. He was not this, he was not that. He was not the next thing. Just a voice.

Part of our great heritage as Presbyterians, our Reformation heritage was the recovery of the Biblical idea that every single one of us has a calling from God. The calling business is not just for the religious professionals but for every single one of us. We call it the priesthood of all believers. And you have been called as I have been called. In your sphere of life whether it's in this church to a ministry in the church or within your family to a ministry within your family or to your work a ministry within your work. There is a calling in every dimension in life. And our happiness and joy depends on finding it.

We often think it's in getting to the top and there may be some joy in that that I don't deny. Doing our best is really important. But finding our calling is what brings us peace and effectiveness. Knowing that we are doing what God wants us to do. There is no peace like that. And that calling is what God wants for every one of us. John Calvin our theological forefather wrote these words, he said (Institutes 3:10:6)

'The Lord bids each one of us in all life's action to look to his calling. For he knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is born hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. If we know that the Lord's calling is in everything, the beginning and foundation of well doing, then the magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly. The head of the household will confine himself to his duty. Each person will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness and anxieties in his own way of life when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him or her by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.'

Nothing to do with where you are on the scale. Nothing to do with who's the winner or who is not.

But if we have not yet found what God wants us to do, are we looking for it? Will we ask our Christian friends to help us discern? This is our role as the body of Christ to help one another discern our calling in all kinds of areas of life, and to give our heart and soul and mind and strength to pursue it. In this lies the life that Christ longs to give to us. And John the Baptist knew this.

The voice – John the Baptist – knew this, that winning wasn't the only thing, wasn't even the main thing. The main thing was discovering your calling and the first thing, unquestionably the first thing was Jesus Himself.

THE FIRST THING IS JESUS CHRIST. So back to the scripture again! What does John the Baptist say about this Jesus? He says "I'm not this, I'm not that, I'm not the next thing. But this Jesus, he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That is, there's no one, absolutely no one, like him. He is first! And John says this not as a statement of humility. Jesus just is! He's first. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of God. "He is more important than me because he was before me," says John the Baptist (1:30). Meaning, he's lived through all eternity. He has become incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and He is eternal in a way that John the Baptist was not.

He is number one. And the acknowledgement of this truth is not something that we force on ourselves, something that presses us down or diminishes us. But the opposite. In coming to see it, it actually liberates us. We don't need to be number one. We just don't need it. Because He is. And when we see that, there is a great liberating power. Jesus does not become number one in our lives to crush us ... as if "He must increase and as he does he will push me down so I decrease." But when we decrease so that He can increase, he actually lifts us up higher than we could ever be by doing anything else.

And this is His joy. And this was John the Baptist's joy (3:29). This is why, when his disciples came to him and said "Hey there's competition up the road, up the river. Jesus is baptizing more people than you. You need to be anxious about this." ... this is why John says

- No, my joy is actually now fulfilled. I'm okay with that. I really am.
- Winning is not the only thing. I have an image of what this is about which empowers me to live my life with confidence. He's the groom. I have the privilege of being a friend of the groom.
- And the main thing is that God has called me to do something. I'm a voice. I'm a happy to be a voice whatever it is. Your calling too is there. Find it and find your happiness within that calling.
- And the truth of the matter, not just a statement of humility ("oh, he's better than me"), the truth of the matter is that He is *the only one* who can take

away the sin of the world. He is *the only* one who was eternally in the bosom of the Father. He is *the only one* who is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

And when we give those words life within us, what we will find is that Christ's life will flow in us and through us and we will know this good news, now and through all eternity, and find our hearts being deeply grateful to the living God.

Let us bow before God in prayer.

Holy Father, in the stillness of this moment come to us through your spirit. Bring your Son Jesus to us as He came to those He met in flesh and blood so long ago. May we find life in His glory and His call and His embrace. Grant us a sense of amazement that we can be the friends of the groom. Hear our prayer and all our prayers. It's in Jesus' name we ask this. Amen.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800