

Outing Jesus

Preached FCCW on January 12, 2020

Matthew 3:13-17

The person we know as John the Baptist was born to a family with a rich priestly lineage. His father, Zechariah was a priest who served in the Temple, and his mother's genealogy could be traced back to Aaron, who was the brother of Moses and the original priest of the Jewish priesthood. So, the assumption was that John would grow up to follow in his parent's footsteps.

But John had other plans. Or, you could say, God had other plans for John. John turned his back on the priestly life and went off to the wilderness to be part of a community of ascetic Jews who lived under the expectation that divine judgment was just around the corner. Instead of the comfortable robes of a Temple priest, he wore a tunic of camel's hair fastened with a leather belt. In place of dinners prepared from the grade-A sacrifices that people brought to the Temple, he chose a diet of locusts and wild honey. In today's world, he might be likened to the son who ditches a three-piece suit and corner office in the family business to run off and join a commune, wear tie-dyed t-shirts and wait for the Age of Aquarius to dawn.

John was also something like a Revival preacher. He believed his purpose in life was to be the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah, as Isaiah had prophesied centuries before. He staked a spot at the Jordan River where he preached a message of warning about the need for people to confess their sins, repent, and turn their lives around before it was too late. For all of that, there was something about the authenticity of John and his message of the necessity for spiritual renewal that struck a chord with people. They came in droves from far and wide to be baptized by him as a sign of their acceptance of his message and of their commitment to a changed life that would reflect their new belief. Then one day, among the thronging multitude who waded into the Jordan to be baptized, one appeared whose presence sent a shudder down John's spine.

Before John was born, the angel Gabriel told John's mother Elizabeth, that her son would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he was conceived. So, when the next person in line to be baptized was Jesus, maybe it was the Holy Spirit dwelling within John who whispered in his ear, "This is Him. This is the One who will fulfill all the promises of God you have been waiting for. Here is the One who will accomplish everything that you have been preaching about and preparing these people to receive." Whatever it was, *something* caused an instant and dramatic reversal of roles, where John suddenly found *himself* in the position of the penitent sinner, and Jesus the one offering encouragement about embracing an opportunity for personal righteousness.

John gasped, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" When he looked at Jesus, John saw for the first and only time, a man who had no sins for which to repent. Someone without a single stain that begged to be washed clean by the waters of baptism. Someone who

needed nothing that John had to offer, but who offered John the one thing that he—and the entire world—truly needed. Salvation.

So powerful was John's reaction that it says he would have *prevented* Jesus from being baptized. Fortunately, Jesus would not take "no" for an answer. Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." In essence, Jesus was telling John that there was a good reason not to treat him differently than any other person who came needing to be baptized. Even if that reason was not apparent to John.

While all four of the Gospels mention the Baptism of Jesus, Matthew is the only Gospel writer who records this brief conversation for us. Without his record of these two brief sentences, the importance this pivotal moment might be easily overlooked.

Imagine if John had ignored Jesus' appeal for anonymity. What if, instead of baptizing Jesus, John dropped to his knees and begged Jesus to baptize him; "outing" Jesus as the Messiah right there in plain sight of the crowds of people around them? In an instant, John could have handed Jesus a ready-made army of followers, ready to do his will. But maybe Jesus already had a premonition of a painful lesson that he would learn throughout his ministry. Which is that any faith in him based solely on human testimony—even from the likes of someone like John--would always be fickle and fragile if it was not backed up by an inner conviction deep in one's spirit.

But John did consent to Jesus' request to be baptized. And when Jesus was plunged beneath Jordan's waters, and then broke the surface as he rose again, the heavens above were also broken open. Two things happened then, which Mark and Luke's Gospels also describe. One is that the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove descended from heaven and rested on Jesus. The second is that God's voice from Heaven announced Jesus to be His Son.

But, here again, Matthew's Gospel is slightly--but significantly-- different in the details. Mark and Luke both describe these events as being experienced only by Jesus. That they were invisible and inaudible to the crowds gathered around. The voice from Heaven speaks directly and distinctly to Jesus and no one else. "*You* are my son. With *you* I am well pleased." But Matthew remembers it differently. In Matthew, the voice of God declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Do you hear the difference? Not "*you*" are my Son. "*This*" is my Son. In Matthew, God is not speaking a private word to Jesus, as if to encourage him in the ministry he is about to undertake. In Matthew, God is speaking to the crowds, declaring Jesus to be God's Son. Jesus did not need John's testimony to "*out*" him to the people as their Messiah, because he had a more authoritative testifier to his authority.

Our own baptisms are no less an opportunity for "outing" Jesus as our Savior, than that long-ago baptism recorded in the four gospels. If we were baptized at an age when we could speak for ourselves, then we would have been asked to say with our own lips that we accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. To profess our faith that he is God's beloved Son who submitted himself to earthly life as we know and live it in order to save us for eternal life. And if we were baptized

when we were but a baby, then our parents committed themselves to “out” Jesus to us as we grew so that one day we could decide for ourselves to be his disciples.

But if the words said over the baptismal waters are spoken once and then forgotten; if they are not accompanied by the divine testimony of a changed perspective on life; or signs of growth toward more Christ-likeness in our character, then they ring hollow.

If we commit to live a baptized life, though, devoted to loving God with all our heart, mind and soul; committed to loving our neighbor as ourselves by seeing that they are not denied the peace and justice that we want for ourselves; then the Holy Spirit rests upon us, anointing us with the courage, the gifts and the ability to accomplish far more than we ever could on our own. And if the language with which we speak helps others to understand themselves as God’s beloved daughters and sons; then we too will be “outing” Jesus by the ways we live.

That is the calling we have been given through our baptism. It is a calling that can have dramatic impacts on our life choices, as it did regarding the life choices that John the Baptist made. So, let us be mindful of what sort of Jesus we are “outing” to the world. Not a Jesus that conforms to our prides and prejudices, but a Jesus who proclaims God’s perspective of beloved-ness for all.

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