

3rd Sunday of Advent – December 13, 2020

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I told you once in a sermon a while back about a friend I had in grade school who turned out to not be a very good friend, how I went to his house for a sleepover and in the morning he made me a breakfast sandwich that he said he invented. It was good. Then he offered to make me another one, but I would have to pay for the second one. He had ambitions for opening his own restaurant someday I guess. Anyway, that was kind of the beginning of the end of the friendship. I had the sense that he saw me not as a real friend so much as a potential customer. I bring that up again because I want to contrast it with a very different experience I had with another friend, this time a real friend, twenty or so years later. This is a friend of mine in Chicago, and there was this time when he and I went out to dinner, just the two of us. I'm struggling to remember when that was, or why it was just the two of us, because normally we have our wives with us when we visit. But anyway, I remember this particular dinner because he took me to a sushi restaurant and introduced me to sushi. Now I'd heard about sushi before this, but had never tried it, or really even wanted to try it. Eating raw fish was not something that sounded like a good idea to me, because, "eww," and because I had reservations about its safety. But there we were. He loved sushi and knew what to order. He had me try a variety of raw and not raw options, and I liked it. I liked it a lot. Now it's one of my favorite foods, something I've even learned to make myself at home over the past 20 years. My friend got nothing out of this beyond the joy of sharing something he loved with me.

I bring all this up as a way of helping us to think about John the Baptist in our Gospel reading this morning. You may have noticed that at least part of this reading is remarkably similar to last week's Gospel text. My pastor colleagues noticed, both at our Monday morning text study by Zoom, and on the Facebook group for ELCA pastors, where some of them were ranting about their frustration with the lectionary. I didn't really talk about John the Baptist in my sermon last week, though, so I'm happy to do it this week.

There are three things I want us to see about John the Baptist in the Gospel of John, some from our reading today and some from what comes right after it. The first is that John wants to be absolutely clear about who he is *not*. Second, he points to something that others might not have noticed without him. And third, by his announcing and pointing he brings others into relationship with the one he is not.

So, first, John is clear about who he is *not*. I shared with you last week a trick of the pastor trade about weddings. Today I want to share a common experience that many pastors have had with young children. It's happened to me at least twice that a parent will come to me and tell me that their little one thinks that the pastor is God. It makes sense if you think about it. Church is the place where God is regularly and consistently talked about, and the one who is usually talking about God is the pastor. As young children try to wrap their imaginations around the idea of God, it is understandable that they would see the person in the funny clothes up front in the place where God is talked about and prayed to and think that he or she is God. So, pastors sometimes have to tell young children who they are *not*. That's kind of what John the Baptist was doing. Not that anyone thought he was God, but, because he talked about the one who was coming from God, the Messiah, that he might himself be the Messiah. John is as clear as he can be here. It's not his show. He's just the opening act.

Second, John points to something others might not have noticed without him. All of the famous paintings of John the Baptist in the history of art have him pointing away from himself, usually to Jesus, sometimes up to heaven. He's kind of like our signs out on Prospect and Springfield. It was surprising to me to discover how much the little Illini Studio building hides our much bigger church building behind it when you are at that intersection. Our signs help you to notice our building, especially now that we've fixed the lighting issue. To see how John the Baptist is like this we have to get into the verses that come right after our reading this morning, which was actually our Gospel reading way back in January of this year. John sees Jesus and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" It happens again the next day when two of John's disciples are with him. Without John's help, Jesus might have appeared to them as just another ordinary guy.

And this brings us to the third thing I want us to understand about John the Baptist in the Gospel of John. Without John's help, it seems that Jesus would have just passed those disciples by. But with John's help they are brought into relationship with Jesus. In fact, they go off and follow Jesus and leave John behind! John's remarkable task is not to build his own following, but to introduce others to Jesus. How's that for an evangelism strategy? "He must increase," John famously says about Jesus two chapters later (Jn. 3:30), "but I must decrease."

We've been talking a lot about stewardship here at Grace over the past couple of months. That's an important thing for any congregation to do. This congregation needs your financial support, as well as your time and your involvement in our ministry. That's a little bit more difficult these days when we can't meet together in person during this pandemic, and we are trying to be creative in involving our members in what we *are* able to do. But as important as stewardship is – and it is, let me be clear about that... as important as that is, our central task as a community of faith is John the Baptist's task of ultimately drawing attention away from ourselves and toward Jesus, of bringing others into relationship with Jesus, and being the conduit for each other of that relationship.

This Christmas Eve, at our 7:00 service of lessons and carols, the final reading of the evening will be from this first chapter of John, the prolog to John that begins, "In the beginning was the word..." The first part of our reading today comes from that prolog, but we're going to skip over that in the reading on Christmas Eve. I want you to remember, though, when you hear the final proclamation of that reading, that "the Word became flesh and lived among us," that we, like John the Baptist, have a role in making that happen, in connecting the eternal Word of God to the real, enfleshed lives of others in the here and now, even and especially in this most unusual of Advent and Christmas seasons.

Thank God for John the Baptist, and thank God for this and all communities of faith that gather around the word and sacraments of Jesus Christ. May God grant us grace to be faithful to our calling—to recognize who we are not, to point to the one who gives us life, and to bring others and ourselves into relationship with him. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.