

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday After Epiphany, January 12, 2020

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 498:1-4, 3:1-2, 63, 507, 346:5-6.

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11, Acts 13:16-25, John 3:1-2.

Sermon Text: John 3: 22-36.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

This is just after Jesus' visit with Nicodemus in which Jesus assured us that ***“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”*** John 3:16-18 (NIV) Now we see more of

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS

1. **John's disciples were upset by Jesus' growing influence.**
2. **John reminds them that he was not the important one, but his job was to point people to Jesus.**
3. **Jesus must also “become greater” in our lives.**

Our text tells us that John the Baptist and Jesus carried on parallel ministries for a time. ***“Jesus and his disciples”*** were baptizing in ***“the Judean countryside”*** and John was also baptizing in the same region ***“because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized”***. ***“An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.”*** We aren't given any more details about the argument, but it may have had something to do with baptisms. Ceremonial washings, also called “baptisms” but not referring to the sacrament of Holy Baptism, were common among the Jews.

Then we read that John's disciples ***“came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan--the one you testified about--well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.’”*** John's disciples were upset. Why? Do they think they will lose their own prestige or influence as their leader becomes less important? But John tells them that he is not the bridegroom. He is just a member of the wedding party.

John was baptizing and Jesus was baptizing. Although both taught repentance and faith, a dispute broke out involving John's disciples and an unnamed Jew. And we read that John's disciples were upset that someone else, namely Jesus, was receiving attention, and people were following him.

At the root of the problem was an increasing sinful sense of opposition and jealousy toward Jesus among John's disciples. Since Jesus came on the scene, they complained, ***“everyone”*** was going to him. Bigger and bigger crowds followed Jesus as fewer and fewer came to John. They didn't think that was right.

They even avoid naming Jesus. They only describe him, but in a way that brings out the thoughts that Jesus was somehow under obligation to John and that Jesus is showing himself ungrateful to John. Had they forgotten John's words as recorded in chapter 1 of John's Gospel? There we read that ***“John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.’ Then John gave this testimony: ‘I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.’”*** John 1:29-34 (NIV)

John's followers speak as though John had done much for Jesus by testifying of him as he did. But, now they feel as though *"that man"* is competing with their beloved master, competing with him after having received so much from him! By adding the exaggeration that *"all men"* are running after Jesus these disciples betray their partisanship toward John.

Don't we even today in the church find such opinionated disputes? Even in Saint Paul's day such disputes occurred, for he wrote to the Corinthians: *"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?"* 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 (NIV)

Disagreements such as expressing dislike or approval for this pastor or that pastor can even occur today, whenever we care too much about ourselves and our popularity or when we want to speak ill of someone or praise some human being instead of Jesus and his gospel. Such sinful opinions are a disgrace to Christ and his message.

But John had a God-given answer. *"To this John replied, 'A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'"*

John defers to Jesus – again. John again emphasizes that Jesus is the important one. John's answer revealed that he clearly knew his place in God's plan. Whatever place we have in life we have from God. John spoke truth for all men, and we can make special application to Christians. We have what we have and we are what we are because God has given it to us. We need to work within that reality to the glory of God.

John's God-given role was to prepare the way for Christ. He found his joy in doing that. He likened himself to the friend of the bridegroom. *"The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete."*

John's meaning should be obvious. Jesus is the bridegroom who has the bride. John is the friend of the bridegroom. God arranged this relationship, and for John it is plainly a blessing. The bride is everyone who by faith truly belongs to Jesus. If, indeed, *"all men"* are going to Jesus, John dare not show the slightest touch of envy but can only rejoice in that fact.

Today we might think of John as a groomsman at a wedding. His great joy is to see the bride, which Scripture often uses to picture the church, that is, all believers, and the bridegroom, Christ, come together. When Jesus, the bridegroom, appears, all attention must turn to him.

The words *"He must become greater; I must become less"* stand out as reality and truth for John and for all Christians. It makes an appropriate motto for believers. It shows what happens when we believe and live that faith. Our purpose in life is to glorify Jesus.

So Christ must continue to increase, and John must continue to decrease. The Greek word for *"become greater"*, increase, is the word used for a plant that grows and flourishes and bears fruit. To become less implies a diminishing importance. John was working himself out of a job, so to speak, in favor of Jesus.

Jesus, who is the eternal Word, the Son of God, came from heaven. He deserved the attention he was getting. John was born on this earth like all ordinary human beings. He spoke only of the things God revealed to him on earth. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke of what he had seen and heard in heaven, such as the heavenly things he had spoken to Nicodemus.

Unfortunately, Jesus' heavenly testimony fell mostly on deaf ears.

John the Baptist received the witness of Christ. He realized that he was witnessing God's truth, and set his seal on that truth. He certified it from his experience. Isn't that the way it is for everyone who believes in Jesus? When God has sent someone, as he did John the Baptist, that person speaks the words of God. We can do it because God gives his Spirit to us.

What God gives us, however, is a small measure compared to what he gave his Son. God's purposeful, immeasurable love was given to Christ from eternity and in his humanity, and God gave all things into his hand.

We are to speak the truth of God's Word – not only God's law and "what we can't do and don't have" but the good news that gives hope beyond a paycheck and beyond what is happening in this world.

John was happy, even joyful, that people were following Jesus because of him, for that was his, John's, calling and his job. *"He must become greater; I must become less."*

John knew his mission, and his place. ***“The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.”*** This is plainly about Jesus. John here is talking about Christ and the relationship of Christ to men.

John makes reference to a wedding, a joyful occasion, something his hearers would be familiar with. Typically the groom and his friends would go to the bride’s house and escort her and her attendants to the groom’s parents’ house. A joyous wedding feast would then occur, ending when the groom brought the bride to his own home. John, just like his example, is the friend of the bridegroom, ***“and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice.”***

John says ***“That joy is mine, and it is now complete.”*** John feels no envy or rivalry toward Jesus. With these words he is trying to make his remaining disciples do the same.

So what are you going to take home from today’s sermon?

First, I hope you will remember that every Christian has a role in God’s kingdom. When we read in Romans that ***“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”*** Romans 8:28 (NIV) we must never forget that each believer has ***“been called according to [God’s] purpose.”*** Every one of us has a purpose in God’s kingdom and the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what we have been called to do, not only to live out our lives serving only ourselves.

Second, how about your role? How is Jesus your guide, mentor, and role model? What kind of messenger are you? John was publicly preaching repentance and proclaiming Jesus Christ and what he came for. He was pointing to Jesus Christ with his entire life. Do you? Are you in your lives pointing to the great things God has done for you?

And are you in words telling anyone who needs hope or comfort or encouragement about the hope, and comfort, and encouragement you have found in God’s Word? Sometimes it seems that our young children are much more open in talking about that good news about Jesus to others. Sometimes they are not ashamed to witness about Jesus when we seem to be.

So how can you witness? There are many ways. Your actions sometimes speak louder than the words you are speaking. Another way is inviting others to come and hear, just as Philip did when he ***“found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’”*** When Nathaniel mocked him: ***“‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked. ‘Come and see,’ said Philip.”*** John 1:45-46 (NIV)

Are you ashamed of the place you worship? You should not be, unless it is not clean – and sometimes it needs you to help clean it! It may not be considered an especially “churchy place”. We may not have stained glass windows, chandeliers, or pews, but we don’t come here to look out the windows. We come here to hear the Word of God, to pray, to praise God through music and our words, and to receive the forgiveness of sins. And remember sadly, that in many of the most “churchy places” in the world, people no longer hear that Jesus Christ died for the forgiveness of all their sins. Wherever we worship, we want it to be and show the best we can do for the Lord.

I’m telling you about Christ in this sermon. I am just a messenger. John was just a messenger. And finally, you are “the messenger.” What you tell to whoever is the message of eternal life.

This section of Scripture ends with the words ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”*** In case anyone could have missed or forgotten the point of this chapter, indeed of the entire Gospel, this verse sums it all up again. Everyone born into this world is by nature an object of God’s wrath. Whoever believes in the Son of God has eternal life and has escaped God’s wrath. However, anyone who doesn’t believe the Son, but ignores or rejects Jesus Christ, will not see life. That person remains under God’s wrath.

We believe and live, not only under God’s great protection here and now, but will live eternally.

John assures us that Christ is the most important. What is really most important in your lives? Isn’t it really Jesus Christ? Then say it. Live it. Who is more important? You, me, or Jesus?

Let it be known that Jesus is important in your lives! Let all the people whom you know, your friends, your acquaintances, your children and grandchildren know this. Without Jesus Christ, there is nothing but condemnation. Live as God’s children every day and tell every day of the good things Jesus has done for you every day. May the Holy Spirit help you to do this! Amen.