

## IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU – OR ME

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*John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." (John 1:26-27)*

Today's reading from the Gospel of John reminds me of a story that my father used to tell about himself, and on himself. My father was an Episcopal priest, as am I. We both graduated from General Seminary, but he was a student there in the 1950's, a vastly different time than ours in church and society. Those were the days when Eisenhower was in the White House, Episcopal pews were full, and the seminaries were bursting at the seams with eager young men, many of them returning veterans. They had fought them on the beaches. They had fought them in the air. And now they were ready to charge out of the classrooms and fight them in the parish.

Dad had a friendly rivalry with another student in his class. They were about the same age, they were both sponsored by the Diocese of Newark, and though they wouldn't have admitted it at the time, they were both zealous to outshine one another in the ministries that lay ahead of them. Within a few years after graduation, both had been called to lead their own churches in the same diocese. Dad became the rector of a small, struggling parish in the inner city of Newark. His friend was appointed vicar of a mission church in a prosperous new area. Both embarked on their new callings, full of energy and idealism. Nine years passed. Dad's friend grew the mission church, and it soon became a parish. People took notice and wrote glowing articles about the church and their priest and their innovative ministry. Dad's friend moved on to become the rector of perhaps the largest, most prosperous church in the diocese.

Meanwhile, Dad remained at the small church in the Roseville section of Newark. Several times he was passed over for other parishes. The neighborhood around the church declined; the Newark race riots devastated the area; parishioners moved away. Even though he poured himself into the place and people, my father felt stuck, overlooked, undervalued. It became more and more difficult to hear and read the glowing reports about his successful friend. Slowly but surely the friendship faded, and eventually it died altogether.

This brings me back to today's reading from the Gospel of John. John tells the story of two other young servants of the Lord who were eager to proclaim the kingdom of God. Both embarked on their callings, full of energy and idealism. Both would serve in the same relatively small geographical area surrounding Jerusalem. The first is John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the fiery prophet we encounter every Advent. As we heard last week, John was a hermit who lived in the desert. His ministry was innovative, to say the least. His appearance was unkempt, even shocking. His diet was locusts and wild honey. John had a message that he wanted people to hear, and people apparently thought he was worth hearing. They flocked to him. John developed his own inner circle of followers, or disciples. They, along with many Jews, thought John might be the promised Messiah, or Elijah, or at least a great prophet like Moses. No doubt about it, John was making headlines and attracting the attention of all the right religious authorities.

The second servant of the Lord actually never appears in today's reading, and is not even named. But he is implied. I refer, of course, to Jesus. The relationship between John and Jesus is largely shrouded in mystery. The gospel writer Luke mentions that John's mother, Elizabeth, was related to Jesus' mother, Mary, even though Elizabeth was much older than Mary. Were Jesus and John second cousins? If so, did they grow up together? We can only speculate about how they

might have been related, or knew each other in the past. However, what we can piece together with some degree of confidence is how their relationship evolved once they began their respective ministries in the Judean countryside. What comes clear as the gospel stories move along is that John's star began to fade, and attention shifted to Jesus. At one point John's disciples even complained that Jesus was drawing the crowds away from John. Today we would refer to the poaching of members from other churches as sheep stealing.

How did John respond to the growing popularity of Jesus' ministry that was overshadowing his own? Did John feel undervalued and unappreciated? Did their friendship fade and die? Not at all. According to John, whatever relationship it was that he had with Jesus, it was never a rivalry. In today's reading from the Fourth Gospel we hear how the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John if he were the Messiah. John confessed emphatically: I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the Prophet. John declared that his ministry was not to compete with Jesus, but to prepare the way for Jesus. "*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*" John embraced the role of "advance man" for Jesus, believing that it was for this reason he was born. John saw himself not as a backup waiting for his chance, not as a number-two who could step in and take charge. No, John was merely the advance man. His mission was his gift. It was God's gift to him, and in turn, his gift to the world. John's sense of self, his very meaning and purpose, came from understanding that the kingdom of God was not about him. Imagine: it wasn't about him. It was about Jesus, always and forever. It was about the one coming after him, the thong of whose sandal he was unworthy to untie. "He must increase, but I must decrease," is what he would say.

Do we dare consider embracing a life orientation such as John's? John's refusal to promote himself is a quality we salute as a virtue, but it is something we have a tough time affecting in our daily lives. *I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals* is not something we say easily or at all in reference to other people. The world is a competitive place. The world is full of rivals, some friendly, and some not. We have rivals at work, rivals at school, rivals against whom we must compete. I remember playing college baseball and having a friendly rivalry with another member of the team, a lanky farm boy from South Dakota. We were both competing for the same outfield position on the starting lineup. Defensively we were equals, but somehow, skinny though he was, this kid could hit monster home runs. For the life of me I could not figure out how he generated the power with his spindly arms and legs. As it turned out, I would have plenty of time to ponder the mystery from my seat on the bench. Believe me, *he must increase, but I must decrease* was the furthest thought from my mind. I wanted to be out there. I wanted to compete.

Most people want to compete. Most people have goals and ambitions, and want to strive and see an increase in their accomplishments. Although it is generally considered unwise to measure your success in comparison to someone else, the fact is we do. We often can't resist the sidelong glance at those who are running the same race as ours. Are they gaining on me? Am I keeping up? Am I falling behind? These are the anxious questions we ask as we compete for our places. The competitive urge is a mixed bag. On the one hand it causes us to reach for a better life and pursue excellence. It makes life interesting. On the other hand, the competitive urge causes us to see dealings with other people as a contest to be won. It makes life vicious. But compete we must, because that's just the way things are, we conclude. If we don't advance our own little kingdoms, no one else will.

Some people look at the life of faith with great suspicion, almost as if a conspiracy were afoot. They fear that certain religious qualities we extol will take away their edge. Humility, obedience, and kindness will make them soft. Beware of those who tell you to slow down, or stop and smell the roses. It's a trick; they merely want to dash ahead of you. Thus, to counter the suspicions of the conspiracy theorists, I think it's worth taking a deeper look at John the Baptist. Did John really drain himself of all personal ambition? Was John soft? Hardly. In speaking of

John, Jesus described him as anything but a reed shaken by the wind. John was no comfortable cleric clothed in soft, rose-colored vestments. *Truly, said Jesus, I say to you that among those born of women, there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11).*

So it seems that God's will wasn't to cancel John's personal drive and ambition. Rather, it was to baptize John's spirit, and to enlist his tremendous will and determination into the service of the kingdom. That's why John, in turn, baptized people on the banks of the Jordan River: to sign them up in service of the kingdom, and get them ready for Jesus. We heard John declare this week and last week: *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8).* Indeed, God's will is to fill us with the Spirit of Jesus, and transform ambition into vocation. When we give ourselves fully to God and the work of the kingdom, then all of life becomes holy and sanctified, even the most mundane of pursuits.

Years ago Stacie and I bought a house in the suburbs near the church I was serving at the time. It needed work on the outside, so we decided that vinyl siding was the way to go. We called a man who could do the job and made arrangements to meet him at the house. He arrived with his apprentice and began describing what he would do. The house had some odd angles to it, but clearly the man was an artist. Vinyl was his medium, and our house would be his canvass. As he spoke, I could tell that he deeply loved his work. He believed that he was making the world a more beautiful place, one panel of vinyl, one house at a time. The man simply radiated the joy of the Lord. I wasn't ready to quit my day job, but I could almost imagine signing on as one of his apprentices, so compelling was his vision. Needless to say, we gave him the job, and I've always remembered him as someone who found his calling, and embraced it, and knew himself to be a servant of the Lord. So it is that the heavens declare the glory of God, and even vinyl siding can proclaim his handiwork. Who knew?

Finally, what about those two priests in the Diocese of Newark all those years ago? Whatever became of their friendly rivalry that actually bred envy and resentment? When I was considering my own calling to the priesthood, I asked hard questions of my father about the life it would entail, even though I'd had an inside view of it. I asked about his frustrations over feeling stuck at the small church he served in the inner city. He recalled that after being passed over for a position he particularly wanted, he finally offered up to Christ his will. He prayed that if God wanted him to remain where he was for the rest of his career, that's what he would do, and he would do it with all his might. He would embrace the calling of the Lord right there. Surprisingly, paradoxically, it was soon after surrendering his ambition to God's will when he received a call to another church.

But the story didn't end there. Much later in his career Dad moved onto the final church he would serve. Out of the blue his old friend wrote him a letter of congratulations. In the letter Dad's friend wrote how he had always admired him for the way he stuck to his work in the inner city when everyone else was fleeing to the suburbs. *I never had the courage to take a call like yours,* is what he wrote. *I always sensed that you were the one really doing the Lord's work.* My father recalled being stunned, chagrined, humbled. For all those years, the one whose success he had quietly resented had actually been standing in admiration of his ministry.

The prophet Isaiah (61:1-4, 8-11) declared that God's will is to build up the ancient ruins, to raise up the former devastations, to repair the ruined cities. God's will is to take personal ambition – yours and mine – and transform it into vocation.

Therefore, St. Paul could write to the Thessalonians (5:16-18): *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*