

Homily – The Humility of John the Baptist

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Today on our second Sunday in the season of Advent, this season of preparation, we hear about someone who is preparing the way for Jesus.

John the Baptist was a significant figure in his own right. He was a Jewish prophet with his own message and disciples. And, John ran afoul of Herod Antipas and was in prison and executed by him, as reported by the Jewish historian Josephus.

Who can forget the story of the head on the platter, as told in three of our four Gospels.

Now, the movement founded by John continued not only after the baptism of Jesus, and not only after the death of John, but also after the resurrection and the beginning of the early Christian community. Chapter nineteen of the New Testament Book of Acts tells of this ongoing community of John.

“While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them..”

Early Christianity experienced the Baptist group as a competitor, and in various ways re-interpreted the traditions about John from the Christian perspective to incorporate them into the developing Christian tradition. Thus, John the Baptist is made into a supporting role for the bigger and more important unfolding of Jesus.

So, in the Gospel according to Matthew, John is depicted as a precursor of Jesus, a parallel figure who also already knows himself to be subordinate to the Messiah, unworthy even to carry his sandals.

However, for some reason, John never became a disciple of Jesus. He and his followers may have been allies of Jesus, but they remained separate until a few years after the resurrection when the Apostle Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus.

So, I am a little confused about John. Did he have a sense of pride in his own vision about the role of a Messiah as king and warrior? Or, was he the humble, subordinate, precursor as we often think of him?

Now, sermons on today's Gospel reading often focus on John's cry for repentance. In this season of preparation, we are to repent, and turn away from the bad things we have going on in life.

However, this year I want to focus on the humility of John. Whether John was a man full of pride, or a humble servant, I want to use his story as a spring board to focus on the spiritual virtue of humility.

Now in contemporary American society, humility is seen as weakness. It is seen as having low self-regard and a sense of unworthiness. In our society, pride and self-assertion are valued, as we claw our way to the top. To that extent we are very much like the Romans of two thousand years ago.

And, as we all know, Jesus had a lot to say about humility that was at odds with his society. And by extension it is also at odds with our society.

Jesus taught and modeled humbleness. He showed that there is strength and greatness in humility. Pride may seem more straightforward. There is tension in leading a humble life – the tension of discerning how to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; the strain of how to honor the heart of another nation as we honor our own homeland; the tension of how to revere the truths of another wisdom tradition as we cherish our own inheritance; and, the struggle with how to protect the life of other species as we guard the sanctity of our own life-form. Jesus knew such tension.

He was tempted to use his wisdom and his power of presence to serve himself, to lift himself up over others. But to the tempter, he says, "Away with you!" Away with the falseness of believing that I can love myself and put others down.

Living a life of humbleness is getting rid of falseness of all sorts. But, it is primarily getting rid of the false self and the mistaken belief that we have to earn God's love.

God's love is freely given. That is what grace is. Grace is the unearned love that God keeps pouring out onto each and every one of us. There is nothing that we can do to increase God's love for us. And, there is nothing we can do to decrease God's love for us. God's love is always there, and we just need to lean into it.

And, God's love is all that we need. A humble person remembers that it is his or her connection to God that sustains and builds up. Even during the dark night of the soul we can lean into God for hope.

Earlier I talked about John the Baptist, and now I want to turn to another John, John of the Cross.

John of the Cross is a sixteenth century mystic and writer. This John wrote of the dark night of the soul. And, he insisted that the true meaning of humility is not self-depreciation of low self-esteem. Instead humility is when a person accepts and acknowledges that they are very small, quickly passing, and insignificant as a separate self. Not easy stuff, but this is just objective truth. Our value, dignity and even sacredness comes in our connection to God. And, to our delight this is a connection that cannot be taken from us.

John of the Cross expresses a humility and way of living that is consistent with Jesus. And, to John, humility means accepting our unquenchable thirst and needs for God. And, humility means acknowledging our emptiness. Thirst for God and emptiness go hand in hand. These two truths live in tension, but together they are also the foundation for healthy, positive self-esteem and living. We are the beloved of God, and with this foundation we can love God back, love others as the beloved, and love ourselves. Again, we are not special because of what we do, and certainly not for what we have. Each and every one of us is special because we are the beloved of God. Though it is not easy to do, this is what we need to hold onto at our deepest core self. And, this is what can lead us to live into the virtue of humility.

And, when we live with humility we see the beauty that God has built into all those around us as well. A humble person does not need to be better than others but soaks in the beauty that surrounds them.

Now, the easiest way to learn humility is at the feet of someone who already has it. We each need role models and saints in our lives who show us the path to humility. Do you have someone in your life? Are you this model for someone else?

In this season of Advent, this season of preparation, find that person. Learn from them. Be like them. I don't know if John the Baptist was truly humble or if early Christianity changed him to be subservient to Jesus. Jesus is certainly a model for us, and there are many saints who can model humility for us as well. And, if you are lucky you will have a living role model to walk beside.

My prayer is that we can be those people who walk a humble life, so that people point to us and say, "They have the Holy Spirit. I want what they have. How can I get it?"