

St. Barnabas Sermon - December 13, 2020 - Advent III

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John’s disciples became all upset in our lesson today because folks were now going to *Jesus* and *his* disciples to be baptized, and no longer to *them*. It was actually Jesus’ *disciples*, and not *Jesus himself*, who were baptizing. But *still*, there was a sense of *jealousy* here. I mean, after all, baptizing people was what God had called **John** to do! What right did *this fellow*, Jesus, and his followers have to come in, take over, and push John aside! In fact, if we’ll note, John’s disciples didn’t even refer to Jesus by *name* - they merely said, “The one who was with you across the Jordan.”

John’s disciples were reacting as folks in such a situation would *normally* react, weren’t they? They looked up to John. After all, *he* was the one who had called them to repentance, who baptized them, and who had taught them about God! And they didn’t want to see their *spiritual leader* run over “roughshod” by anyone! ... Even if his name *was* Jesus!

Most of us here this morning have been around long enough to have witnessed the kind of reaction and behavior we see here with John’s followers - in our own day and time. I remember when the guy who had been our marketing dept. manager was moved into a different position, and replaced with a much younger man from an office out west. We really liked our old manager, and had a great relationship with him. And some of the guys didn’t even want to give the new man a chance.

And I remember our old manager coming in and telling us that we needed to quit coming to *him* ... and that *Chris* was our new manager now, and that we needed to listen to him, and give him the same chance we had given *him* - our old manager - years before.

John understood what was happening here, though, didn’t he? John *knew* what God’s plan was. And God’s plan was that *he*, *John*, had been sent to *prepare the way* for the one who would come *after* him. John knew that *he himself* was not the one who would come in the fullness of the power of *God’s Spirit*, and with His *messianic anointing*!

And John also knew that there would come a time when he *himself* would step aside, and move into the background, and the *Other* would come forward, and begin his mission and ministry of letting folks know that the Kingdom of God was at hand.

He knew there would come a day, when he would say, “*He* must increase, but *I* must decrease.” (Repeat) And he knew that the time had arrived for the allegiance of *his* followers to shift to Jesus.

It’s not *easy* to invest all of one’s time, and passion, and energy into something - and then have to turn it over to someone else. But, as with John, when one understands the plan, and accepts God’s will from the “get-go” - the transition is different. And when *pride* hasn’t been allowed to get in the way, it’s easier, and more natural to move into the background.

You see, John wasn’t *sad*, or *envious* when his disciples brought him the news that folks were going to Jesus - he was *happy* that God’s plan was unfolding, and *blessed* that he’d been able to play a part in it! “For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled!”

As we move along in our journey through Advent, I believe the question before us now is - Am I willing to let “self” *decrease* in my life, so that Jesus can *increase*? Will I make a commitment, in preparation for his coming, to let Jesus take “center stage” in my life? Or am I so bound to the world’s ideal of being the “captain of my own soul,” that I’m *not willing* to follow John’s example? Am I truly *willing* to allow the Holy Spirit to be the *transforming power* in my life - for the renewal of my mind ... as opposed to being conformed to this *world*?

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

I’m reminded here of St. Paul’s words, “It’s no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me!” This wasn’t something that happened *overnight* with Paul. It was a process over time, beginning when God knocked him off his “high horse,” on his way to Damascus. And it was only as Paul continued to submit himself to the molding, and shaping, and re-creating power of the

Holy Spirit - each step of the way - Paul “decreasing,” and Christ “increasing” - in his life. Only *then* was he able to make this confession.

The great German theologian, seminary professor, and preacher, Helmut Thielicke, said that it's possible to get one's *theology* right - to be orthodox, so to speak, in one's beliefs - but, at the same time, to get one's *relationship* with God all *wrong!!* Orthodox theology is *important* - don't get me wrong! In fact, it's why most of us are where we are today! But your relationship with God, and my relationship with God, through His Son Jesus Christ, as our Savior and Lord - is the *most* important - the *most* critical thing that matters! *Amen?!*

Because, you see, *right theology* can just involve “head knowledge” ... but *right relationship* is from the *heart* - and is what *truly* matters for *eternity!*

John's disciples were caught up in following a charismatic leader. Certainly one who had spoken God's Word of Truth to them - but also one who had *certainly* never intended for folks to place him on any kind of a *pedestal!*

Unfortunately, there are times when this happens in our day and time. Now, I know I know there are leaders within Christian circles who take advantage of such a following, and of being, at times, “idolized” and placed on a pedestal. But there are *others*, just like *John*, whose intention has never been for people to look to them in this way. Their *only* intention has *always been* to point people to *Jesus!*

And this placing on a pedestal doesn't necessarily have to involve an individual *person* either. Folks can place the *institutional Church* - including a particular *denomination* - take your pick - on this same sort of pedestal! And they can become *confused* regarding “the voice” of the institution - often equating when *it* speaks as the voice of *God Himself!* And from personal experience, many of us know that this can be very *dangerous* ... and a tool the *Enemy* chooses to use to deceive folks!

The word of caution here is that every word of human wisdom, and every form of religious expression *must* be seen as *secondary* to the revelation of God that you and I have in Jesus Christ - trusting in our relationship with him, as Savior and as Lord - and understanding him, and only him, as the

Way, the Truth, and the Life! And realizing that the life discipleship - the life of following Jesus - is to *continually* remind ourselves that “*he must increase, but I must decrease!*”

Jesus wasn't just a rabbi, or a sage, or a prophet! And as great and powerful a witness as John the Baptist was - Jesus wasn't even on the same level as *him!* Jesus was, and is, *God Incarnate* - and nothing less!! And it's this point, and not his wisdom, or his perfect sinless life, or even his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy - that makes him *totally unique*.

What makes Jesus *unique* is that he was *God Incarnate* - that he came as one of us, to dwell among us - so that humankind might experience the *fullness* of God - *first hand!* What makes him unique is that he is the Alpha and the Omega, that he is King of kings, and Lord of lords! What makes him unique is there is no other name under heaven or on earth by which we can be saved! ... that “at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess - that he is Lord - to the glory of God the Father!” *Amen?!*

John knew that Jesus was the Lamb of God - who had come “to take away the sins of the world.” And he was honored to have been *chosen* by God as the one who was to *prepare the way* for him. He was *honored*, and he was also *humble enough to step aside*, once Jesus began *his* ministry - in the power of the Holy Spirit! He was willing to *recognize* that “*Jesus must increase, and that he (John) must decrease.*”

As we walk through the final weeks of Advent, what are you and I doing to let *more* of *Jesus* shine through our lives, and *less* of *ourselves*? Who is sitting on the *throne* of *your* life, and of *my* life - most often? Whose needs are we seeking to meet *first*? How am I, and how are you, responding to those *around us* - including our spouses, and others in our family - as well as the *strangers* we encounter?

Is Jesus *truly* the “reason for the season” for us - or are we so caught up in how the world experiences this time of year, that we seem to forget, more often than not, that *baby* in a manger in Bethlehem ... the *greatest gift* of all?

Let's pray. Lord God, help us continually to be reminded by your Spirit that "he must increase, and we must decrease." And as we begin these last few weeks of Advent, help us to set aside all those things that keep us from allowing this to become a reality in our lives. May others begin to see the light and love of Christ shining through our lives in such a *mighty way* - that they won't be able to resist the *power* of the *message of the Gospel!* All this we pray in the name of your Son Jesus - our *soon-coming King!* *Amen!*