

Sermon Notes, February 7, 2016

I Am Not the Christ, John 1:19-31; 3:28-30

This is an extremely important passage to consider after having spent two Sundays on the passage where Jesus asks His disciples about His identity, about which there is nothing more important. You remember, He asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ... Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Here we are dealing with something else of great significance. This morning I used John the Baptist's confession as the title. After all, the refrain I want to draw our attention to is repeated three times in the text—"I am not the Christ." This is a tremendously needful reminder to us if we're to have genuinely biblical faith. Because before you can believe in Christ you must first disbelieve in yourself, which we will see as we spend time in Luke's Gospel looking at Luke 15 and those things which are lost. And found. So the gospel tells us that this statement, "I am not the Christ", was actually a confession of faith. "*Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ.'*"

This is reiterated in the third chapter. We can conflate that confession somewhat—encapsulate it—with just those two lines that are found in John 1:28 and then verse 30.

"I am not the Christ; He must increase and I must decrease."

Let's just practice that confession, if you would. Christians, what do you believe?

"I am not the Christ. He must increase and I must decrease."

From a biblical, historical perspective this confession of our forbear, John the Baptist, is one that made perfect sense in the first century AD. We know from the biblical record as well as from extra-biblical sources that messianic expectation was rife. You may not have presumed this, but everyone was looking for the Messiah when Jesus came.

Now, we're keenly aware that there are no such timetables for the 2nd Coming of Christ. That's because no one will miss it! You know, when the heavens roll back like a scroll you don't have to wonder, "Is this it, perhaps?" But with the first coming it wasn't so. While we don't have time this morning to develop this theme, people in Jesus' time knew, especially from the prophetic message of Daniel that the Christ had to come after the beginning of the Roman Empire and before the destruction of the Temple. And so when they saw John on the scene, he appeared to be a very fitting candidate for the job description. Listen to Jesus' own comments in Luke 7 about John.

"I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." John must have seemed a fabulous candidate for Messiah—for the Christ. And then here from the lips of John that in his estimate he's not even worthy to untie the sandals that are upon the feet of the one who would come after him—of Jesus. Now you have an idea of the supremacy of Christ.

You see, John's ministry was to point away from himself to Christ. And so, the New Testament does not hesitate to help us appreciate the substantial gifts of John precisely in order to enhance our appreciation of who Jesus is!

John's birth is miraculous—it is inexplicable apart from God's intervention. He is born into a priestly family. John cut a very high profile—extremely popular. People went out to him from Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. He is the first prophet to come after 400 years of silence. No prophetic word for 400 years!

And yet, his own view, correctly, is that *"the one who comes after me, the thongs of his sandals I'm not worthy to untie."* And they say, *"Well, OK, fine. If you're not the Christ, then who are you? Are you Elijah?"* He said, *"I am not."*

The whole symbolism of Elijah would be fun to trace out if we had adequate time. We're surprised to hear John claim that he's not Elijah since the angel Gabriel told his parents that he would come in the power and spirit of Elijah. Gabriel is echoing the last words of the OT in Malachi—the promise of a coming Elijah. Here's Elijah. That's what Gabriel says. Then you ask John and he says, *"No, I'm not."* John is denying that he is Elijah in one sense. He's denying that he is Elijah in the popular elaboration on the Old Testament promise. This is the key to understanding this apparent contradiction.

John wasn't the complete reflection of Elijah. One is coming who will be—Jesus. Jesus performs miracles that remind you of Elijah. Jesus himself stresses how his ministry is like that of Elijah in Luke 4. So in one sense Jesus is the quintessential fulfillment of Elijah. John the Baptist is acutely aware that he only baptizes with water but one who comes after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Nevertheless, Gabriel said John was, and indeed Jesus said John was, and the Scriptures affirm that John fits the portrait just fine. This one of whom no one born of women is greater—this one made the confession, *"I am not the Christ."* Jesus is the Christ. John's ministry was to point to another. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, *"I am not the Christ. He must increase, but I must decrease."*

I'd like to talk a little bit more about that confession and about how it applies to us. If it applied to John the Baptist, it surely applies to us. None of us measures up to the stature of John the Baptist except in redemption. But in and of ourselves none of us cuts that same high profile. But you say, *"Wait a minute. None of us is thinking we are the Christ. We don't need this confession."*

In a group of pastors I meet with regularly I became the recipient of a job description of a pastor. There was a list of character traits right out of Scripture, which as you know is utterly formidable. Titus 1. 1 Timothy 3. But added to this job description was a list of 19 further qualifications for the pastor.

Now, some of you, in hearing all of this are saying to yourself that this is exactly as it should be. After all, why do we pay a pastor?

Others of you may be thinking in more biblical categories and are saying, “Well, pastor, that word ‘pastor’ means ‘shepherd,’ (That’s right. Pastor is just Latin for shepherd.), and a shepherd as we know is everything to the sheep.” And sheep are utterly helpless without the shepherd. It’s a wonderful image, which then the Bible applies to all of us. It’s who we are. And yes, the shepherd is everything to the sheep.

That’s why then, the New Testament, Christians brothers and sisters (this was pointed out to me, among others, from one of the top New Testament scholars and exegetes of Scripture), is amazingly reticent to apply the title “Pastor” to any human leader. In fact, even though the word “pastor” has become so common in English, only occurs once in the New Testament—that in Ephesians 4:11. The related word to “pastor,” “shepherd” appears 16 times in the NT. Every single time it applies to a literal shepherd of literal sheep or it applies to Jesus, who said, “*I am the Good Pastor. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*” The other writers of the NT apply it to Jesus. 1 Peter 2 for example.

As I noted, in only one case do we find an exception. It’s in Ephesians 4:11. There we have the famous text; “*It was he who gave gifts for some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.*” This does not refer to two separate offices. In Greek 99% of the time when you have one article in front of two nouns conjoined with “and” it means that the two mutually define one another. So it is “pastor/teacher.” But pastors are not everything to the sheep. Woe to the church, pity the church that simply and only has a human being for its Pastor, its Shepherd, when that church could have Jesus Christ.

The related verb again (“shepherd”) “to act as a shepherd” or “to act as a pastor” is applied to elders in Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28. He tells them “to shepherd the church of God,” and in the same sentence he refers to God’s people as “all the flock.” The same verb is used in 1 Peter 5, where he tells the elders to “shepherd the flock of God that in in your charge.” It’s translated “be shepherds”, but it’s the verb here—tend. Tend. But it’s a directive not to a single individual in the church, but to a shared leadership. Eldership is a shared ministry. “*And when the Chief Shepherd, the Senior Pastor appears you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*”

So I am therefore an undershepherd—an assistant pastor.

When you finally come to grips with that you say, well if Pastor Jonathan is the assistant you have to ask, “Who is the real Pastor?” And that is then where I get to point to the real Pastor—Jesus. What we have in the scriptures is an unrelenting manifesto against pastor-centeredness.

Everything points to the Christ. And I am not the Christ. And you’re not the Christ.

He is all in all. It is immensely helpful to remember that and be reminded of that.

WHAT IS OUR CONFESSION? WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?

“I AM NOT THE CHRIST!” “HE MUST INCREASE, BUT I MUST DECREASE.”

I think if we would really embrace this, we could not have a more liberating understanding. You see, it at last gives you freedom to fail. It reminds me, and it ought to remind you, that the church isn’t yours. It’s Christ’s! It’s His to build. He’s the Pastor.

I remember talking to a pastor that was called to a very large church, and he told me that someone asked him how he would feel if he bombed. He said this, “*Well, I suppose I would feel miserable. But I then remind myself that it is Christ’s job to build the Church. If it’s my job to build the church we’re in deep trouble.*”

It means that none of us have to be omni-competent. None of us have to be omnipresent.

It means when it comes to counseling, I cannot do the person I’m counseling any greater favor than to disabuse them of the notion that I’m going to make them well.

If I’m not the Christ, then who am I? Well, like John the Baptist I’m the best man. Any of us who are doing ministry in this church are like John. We’re to be the best man. “*You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ 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. He must become greater; I must become less.*”

The “friend” (which is a technical name for best man in the biblical world), the friend or the best man was the one who guarded the bride and even guarded the nuptial chamber to make sure that there would be no encroachments on the sanctity of this marriage. “*I am the best man who attends the bridegroom who waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears his voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must increase & I must decrease.*”

The one thing the best man cannot do is be in competition for the affection of the bride! For those of us in any form of ministry in the church, we cannot let the bride fall in love with us! We cannot compete for the affection of those in the church! We cannot be in competition with one another! Our joy is to watch the Bride fall in love with Christ! — The Groom! He must increase. I, and Sam, and indeed, the rest of us, must decrease.

No man was ever so praised by Christ as this man, John, who said, “*I must decrease that He increase.*”

The next day 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.’*”

Thomas Aquinas, at the end of his life said, “*Yesterday I preached myself and the scholars praised me. Today I preached Christ and sinners thanked me.*”

Christ. It is all Christ. That is why we’re here! This meal we now come to represents the body and blood of the Lamb of God that was shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Let us come and worship the Lamb. Let our eyes be ever on Christ! For Christ is all in all!