

“Who is That Guy?” John 1:19-34 4/22/18

John the Baptist was an odd guy, who knew how to live off the grid before anyone talked about such things! He lived in the desert, wore clothing made from camel’s hair, and ate locusts and wild honey! He also preached, drew large crowds, and baptized people. So, in Act I of today’s story, some important people were asking the question, “Who is that guy?” Last Sunday we began a series of sermons in the gospel of John. In John’s introduction he referred briefly to John the Baptist. In today’s passage we’ll learn more about him, including some things that can be useful to us!

*<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” <sup>23</sup>He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. <sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” <sup>26</sup>John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the*

*one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”*<sup>28</sup>*This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. (John 1:19-28)*

Religious leaders from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem send out priests and Levites to find out what’s going on with this John, who is drawing huge crowds, calling everyone to repent, and baptizing people in the Jordan River. Something seemed strange to them about this, so they send the truth squad to check him out! The story plays out almost like a trial.

From John’s response, we can surmise that they asked him if he was the Messiah or the Christ. Now the Jewish people had been waiting for the Messiah, which means “anointed one,” for centuries. Their expectations for the Messiah varied, but most believed that the Messiah would root out evil and bring about a reign of righteousness, and that he would free God’s people, Israel, from foreign domination- that he would be a spiritual, political, and military leader all rolled into one. But John answers that he is not the Messiah.

Then they ask if he is Elijah, which may seem odd to us, but made perfect sense to them. In the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi promised that the great prophet Elijah would return prior to the

Messiah to get things ready for his coming. (Mal. 4:5-6) If John wasn't the Messiah, maybe he was Elijah. "No," says John, "I'm not Elijah."

"Are you the prophet, then?" they ask. This is based on a biblical promise that went back over a thousand years to the time of Moses- a promise that God would raise up a prophet like Moses, who would speak to the people on behalf of God. "No, I'm not." says John. "Then who are you?" they ask. John quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah, saying he is the one that Isaiah spoke about, one who would cry out in the wilderness, preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. But they don't seem to be impressed by his answer. They just ignore it!

"Well then," they ask, "if you are not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet, by what authority are you doing all of this baptizing?" The Jewish people did practice baptism, but it was only used for Gentiles who were converting to Judaism. It was a symbol of being cleansed from all their pagan ways so they could join God's new way of living as part of the chosen people of God. The fact that John insisted that even his Jewish brothers and sisters needed to repent of their sins and be baptized like common Gentiles must have seemed insulting to the Jewish leaders.

John dodges their question about authority a little bit. I think his point is that what he is doing by baptizing the people is fairly straightforward work, but that the coming Messiah and his work is so far above him, that he

isn't even worthy to untie his shoelaces! And, he says, that although he isn't the Messiah, the Messiah is already among them!

I'm impressed by John's humility here. The untying of the thong of a sandal was a job considered so low that only a slave would do it. John says he is not even worthy to do that lowly task for the Messiah! He knows his place compared to the Christ. But, unlike John, I think many of us struggle with humility. For example, did you know that 93% of Americans believe that they are above-average drivers? Of course, that defies the very concept of what average means! And most of us also perceive ourselves to be above average in intelligence, friendship, marriage, parenting, leadership, work ethic, and managing money! For Christians, that's a problem. God calls us to see ourselves as we really are- a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, selfishness and nobility, sinfulness and virtue. We are all sinners saved by the grace of God. But clearly, we tend to overestimate ourselves!

Jordan Spieth is a professional golfer who is currently ranked third in the world. Time magazine included him in its list of 100 Most Influential People, describing him as someone who "exemplifies everything that's good about sports." After a tournament he always refers to his success using terms such as "we" and "our team." He is quick to credit his parents, caddy, coaches, and advisors for his success. And he always credits his

sister, Ellie, for inspiring him. Ellie is autistic. He hugs her first after every win, and in an interview, he said, “I try to get back home all the time to be with her and regroup...She sets everything in perspective for me. She is so happy for the littlest of things.” Spieth recognizes the temptation for someone in his position to lose his grounding and become ego-centered and prideful. He takes deliberate steps to keep that from happening. What steps do you take to deal with your pride?

Well, let’s move on to Act II of our story, which we might call, “Who is THAT guy?”

*<sup>29</sup>The next day (John) saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup>This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ <sup>31</sup>I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” <sup>32</sup>And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. <sup>33</sup>I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup>And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:29-34)*

God reveals to John that Jesus is the one, the Messiah, the Son of God, and he proclaims this Good News to those around him. Notice the

first words he uses to describe Jesus, “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” This connection between John and the image of the Lamb of God was so strong that during the Middle Ages, almost every painting of John the Baptist had a lamb in it somewhere! The reference to the Lamb refers to the practice of animal sacrifices that were offered in the Jerusalem temple to atone for the sins of the people. John’s gospel teaches that those unending daily sacrifices of sheep would end, because Jesus would offer himself as a one-time sacrifice for the sins of the world! The Lamb of God.

John the Baptist goes on to witness to Jesus’ divinity, when he says that Jesus “*ranks ahead of me because he came before me.*” He is referring back to what we read last week in John’s gospel, that Jesus was in the beginning with God, and that he was God. Serious Bible students might be surprised by John’s next statement that he didn’t know Jesus, because Luke’s gospel tells us that John was related to Jesus. But they grew up in different places and may not have met, or John may simply mean that he didn’t know that Jesus was the Messiah until God revealed it to him.

And then John describes seeing the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove, which the other gospels tell us happened when John baptized Jesus, but John’s gospel curiously omits the baptism! And he hears a voice tell

him that Jesus will baptize others with the Holy Spirit (which we'll read about in chapter 20). Finally, John bears witness that Jesus is the Son of God, which is also a title for the Messiah in the Old Testament. In next week's passage, we'll watch as Jesus begins recruiting his own followers before beginning his public ministry.

OK, so I have to admit that all this talk about John the Baptist reminds me, of course, of football! I grew up following the Washington Redskins. In those days, they were always bad. Come to think of it, they still are! Anyway, they had a couple good years in the late 60's and early 70's with players like Sonny Jurgenson, Billy Kilmer, Charley Taylor, Sam Huff, and a really good running back, Larry Brown. A couple of those guys are in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But there was another guy on that team who I really admired, #31, Charley Harraway. Harraway was the blocking back for Larry Brown, opening the holes through which Brown could run. I remember a couple games when Brown was hurt, and they had Harraway carry the ball. It turned out that he was a very good ball carrier, himself! But his main role, his real value to the team, was blocking for Larry Brown. And so that's what he did, game after game, without complaint, even though he could have made a lot more money, and gotten a lot more attention if he had been the ball carrier.

I think John the Baptist was kind of like that. He was a talented guy in his own right. His gift for preaching drew huge crowds, and it caused people to turn from their sins and turn toward God. And they were spiritually ready when Jesus came on the scene. John had many followers, but he understood that his role was a secondary one, and he embraced that role and performed it well. We'll see him continue to do that elsewhere in John's gospel.

For most of us, there are times when we play secondary roles, too- at work, in community organizations, in our families, in church. John reminds us that these roles are vitally important, and that we can and should embrace them! How are you doing in carrying out the support roles in which God has placed you? They may require some humility, but the tasks are vital! Ask God to give you the humility to do them with grace.