

The Humility of John

I have some more riddles for you. I am always in front of you and never behind you. What am I? (The future.) How many species of animals did Moses take on the Ark with him. (None; it was Noah.) What is the least spoken language in the world? (Sign language.) I once was full of thoughts but now I am white and empty? What am I? (A human skull.) I always run but never walk, I sometimes sing but cannot talk, no head on which a hat to place, you always look me in the face. What am I? (A clock.) What begins when things end and ends all things that begin? (Death.) What is in front of a woman and at the back of a cow? (The letter W.) What can go up a chimney down but can't go down a chimney up? (An umbrella.)

Which is more important: your finger, or the moon? I borrowed [created] that riddle from a Zen "koan" I heard once. A koan is a paradoxical saying or riddle used in Zen Buddhism to awaken the mind. [A famous one being "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"] The actual wording of the koan is "Don't confuse your finger for the moon." Anybody feel awakened? I'll come back to that in due time.

In my sermon last week I talked about how the Gospel of John is full of riddles. In fact the gospel begins with a riddle: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (I called that the "Ultimate Riddle," which was also the title of my sermon.) In today's passage John gives us some more riddles. We find one in verse 23: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" What am I? he doesn't ask (but we want to know). He gives us a hint when he reveals that that was a quote from the prophet Isaiah. (Specifically Isaiah 40:3.) The answer could be, He is the finger pointing to the moon.

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." (There are many/several Johns in the Bible, including the author of the Gospel of John. But in 1:6 we surmise sooner or later that John is talking about a different John, namely John the Baptist.) "He came as a witness to testify to the light," John the Author (or Evangelist) says. But he quickly adds, "He himself was not the light." John the Baptist, in other words, was like a finger pointing to the moon. He was not the moon.

I was really struck this past week by the humility of John [the Baptist]. Throughout today's reading he practically falls over himself saying [stating, exclaiming] who he is not. When the Pharisees' errand boys come to ask him "Who are you?" we read that "He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'" Why this emphatic response? Were some speculating that he might be the Messiah? When he emphatically denies it, they come back to him, "What then? Are you Elijah? The prophet, perhaps?" (They may have been referring to the prophet Isaiah.) They apparently thought John the Baptist was somebody special. Turns out he was. Even though he emphatically denies it. [He was merely a finger pointing to the moon. He was not the moon.]

And then the next day when John sees Jesus coming toward him, John says, "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'" Another riddle—a lot like a Zen koan. And the day before John had already said, "the one who is coming after me...I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." Which sounds like a lowly, humble act indeed. What might we learn from the humility of John?

First, humility like his speaks the truth [both about who we are, and who we are not]. He isn't afraid to admit both who he is and who he is not. Don't we sometimes pretend to be someone that we are not? Someone more important? More special? More gifted? More successful? [Don't we sometimes deny our dark side?] Why do we do that? Are we afraid that we're not worthy? That we don't measure up...to some standard or other, perhaps? And so we hide behind a façade of importance and success. A façade we don't want to admit—to others and to ourselves—is false. We don't want to admit our inherent sinfulness. I will tell you, straight out, that I have sinned [committed sins] that I don't like to admit or talk about. You might not want me as your pastor.

But humility like John's doesn't [seem to] worry about things like that. It doesn't deny the truth, or hide behind false façades. It seems to trust that the truth is alright as it is—it is good enough. It knows that these eyes see us for who we are [show icon] and love us anyway.

Second, did you notice in this story how John the Baptist admitted—twice; once in first 31, and again in verse 33—that he did not know or recognize Christ the first time he saw him. It took a special sign of God; it took the Holy Spirit to come, as a dove, and point him out. The humility of John admits that we don't always know or recognize Christ, even when he is in our midst.

Last week I showed you several additional/other pictures of Christ. Today I'd like to show you another one. [image] Doesn't really look like Christ, does it? Seems almost disrespectful. I found this picture on the web. It's allegedly based, scientifically, on what a first century Palestinian man might have looked like. Notice the darker skin color. Notice the eyes. They're not blue. They're [but rather] brown. How do we know that Jesus the Christ looks like? How do we know he's not African American? Or Iranian?

Third, and related to the last one, humility like John's doesn't claim Jesus [the] Christ only for ourselves. Did you notice how in verse 31 John said he came baptizing with water in order that the Jesus Messiah “might be revealed to Israel” (verse 31). When just two verses earlier he referred to him as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”? Jesus came for the world. Not just for Palestine or Israel. Not just for the United States. Not just for the religious right (and I must add here, if I am honest, not just for the progressive left, as much as I think my understanding of who Jesus is—and for that matter who God is—is the right one).