

**John 1:29-42; WWJBD**

January 16, 2011

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The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared,  
“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said,  
‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not  
know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to  
Israel.”

And John testified,

“I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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.’

And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus  
walk by, he exclaimed,

“Look, here is the Lamb of God!”

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them,

“What are you looking for?”

They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He  
said to them, “Come and see.”

They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was  
about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him  
was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him,  
“We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus,  
who looked at him and said, “You are Simon so of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which  
is translated Peter).

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Growing up I was an avid reader of books. Still am. I read anything and everything I could get  
my hands on. I still remember sitting in the school lunchroom in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading *Gone  
with the Wind* with my friends. Yes, we were *those* kids.

My mom would always suggest books that she loved when she was my age. *A Wrinkle in  
Time*, *Heidi*, *Little Women*. Usually I’d take her up on the suggestion. But as this continued I  
could never get behind her love for *The Grapes of Wrath*. I remember one time she rented  
the old black and white movie, and encouraged me to sit and watch with her. I couldn’t even  
make it through the first 15 minutes. Setting the scene... the land spreads out as far as you  
can see. And a family, looking beaten-down, loads everything they have (which is nothing)  
into their beaten-down car and drive away from their beaten-down shack of a home. Boring.  
I’ll go back to reading *Gone with the Wind*. At least in that movie she makes a fabulous dress  
out of curtains.

It wasn't until seminary when a professor made *The Grapes of Wrath* required reading for a class, that I was forced to sit down and read it. Since then, I have read that book at least once a year. It has become one of my favorite books for so clearly imagining systems of power at work in our world. Plus it turns out that Steinbeck is one heck of a writer.

It's amazing to me how our view of something can change so dramatically- from something not worth even a moments' time to something that changes the way we perceive the world.

I've come to the gospel of John in a similar way. In particular John's telling of the story of John the Baptist and the call of the first disciples that we've heard here today.

It's no synoptic gospel, that's for sure. Meaning, it's no Matthew, Mark or Luke.

John the Baptist, who in those other gospels is a man of action who baptizes one repentant sinner after another in the river Jordan, a man who gives one of the best biblical insults recorded, "you brood of vipers" to the Pharisees and scribes;

here he is instead in the Gospel of John as less fiery-street-preacher and more neon flashing sign "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Go and follow.

Studying this story I am more and more convinced that as the church, we could pay a bit more attention to this unfavorable, unyielding, unnerving man, John the Baptist. He just might change the way we perceive our calling.

Do you remember those bracelets that were popular 10 or so years ago? Plastic or woven bands with WWJD etched in them? A reminder-a good one to be sure- to think before we act, to consider fully what we say. It was popular among teenagers when I was in high school, with eager parents hoping that when it came to a tough decision-

whether or not to cheat on the test,

or to get in the car with a friend who had been drinking,

or to consider taking the relationship to the next level-

the hope was that they would be steered in the right direction with this simple reminder.

WWJD. What would Jesus do?

A daily reminder of our identity as beloved children of God is important absolutely. Yet I wonder if with these sorts of sentiments we can confuse the situation some times.

To be like Jesus?

Is that what we're supposed to attain?

Yes, in some sense it is. We are to love all people, to welcome the stranger, to have compassion and be forgiving; but Christ wasn't just a collection of good behaviors. Jesus is the Messiah. And we are not.

Hear this part of our story today that we didn't read. John is answering to the priests and Levites who are demanding to know just who this man is who is baptizing.

They go through the list of possibilities.

Messiah? No.

Elijah? No.

The prophet? No.

Well if you fit none of our Messianic expectations then just who are you and why are you out here baptizing?

Instead of answering directly, John says this,

“Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal”.

And then this, which we *did* read, “I myself did not know him, but came baptizing with water for *this reason*, that he might be revealed”.

So I wonder if, instead of WWJD, we tried something new. WWJBD. What would John the Baptist do? A standard not just for teenagers, though certainly inclusive of them- but for us as the church.

I think Karl Barth would be on board. The theologian was known to have had in his Bible a sixteenth-century painting done by artist Mathais Grünwald entitled *Insenheim Altarpiece*. This painting depicts the crucified Christ in the center, with John the Baptist to the side. John is small compared to the cross, and he is holding the Scriptures in his left hand while pointing a long finger to Christ with his right.

Starting with John’s first act of confession, *I am not the Messiah, I am not even worthy to untie his shoes*, and throughout this story the entire purpose of John the Baptist is just this, to point to Jesus and say,

Look here! This is the One who you’re looking for.

This is the One who takes away the sin of the world! Follow Him.

John does such a good job that it doesn’t take much more than his proclamation to send Andrew and another disciple on the path with Jesus. John taught them well: that calling, that discipleship, that being part of the body of Christ is a lifetime of acknowledging Jesus among us, following where he goes, and pointing him out wherever he is revealed to us. Andrew assumes this call and points the way for his brother Simon, who becomes the beloved Peter.

What if we wore this bracelet instead?

Or better yet, what if this were the sign plastered on the front of the church?

WWJBD?

What are the actions of a church that in all that it says and does actively points to Jesus among us and out in front?

Tomorrow we celebrate the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., many of us with a day off of school or work. We talked about him this morning in Crosswalk and put together health kits for the Martin Luther King Health Center just a block away. We heard how he dedicated his life as a minister to pointing to Jesus. Who, with his own life, pointed towards a world where all children no matter their skin color were accepted and honored and welcomed as children of God.

In remembrance of Dr. King I've been reading some of his sermons and letters over the last week. One in particular is his Letter from a Birmingham Jail<sup>i</sup>, which I invite you to read on the Musings blog this week in honor of Dr. King. This letter was written to the religious leaders, Christians and Jews, living in Birmingham and calling for Dr. King to give rest to his and others' actions of civil disobedience and boycotts protesting racial segregation in the city. Dr. King recalls in here a letter he received once saying, "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth."

This attitude of "wait and see" was not acceptable to King. To this and to the concerns that now is just not the right time for the church to act for desegregation, King responds, "In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists."

King is calling for this church that he knows as the body of Christ, that he loves deeply and that raised him, to be what they are called to be- servants in the world pointing to Jesus where he is ministering amidst the least. In other words, living out our reformed heritage in a public way, as embodied by John the Baptist. John confesses who he is not—the Messiah, unworthy. This confession and acknowledgement of our own shortcomings and sinfulness and even further of our inaction and fear are at the very root of how we try to be better, to act better, to do better, to speak to one another better, to believe better, to recognize and point to Jesus better. I hear these words of Dr. King and I hear a call to re-examine just what it is the church is talking about these days.

Two weeks ago I spent the week in Montreat, NC with Lauren Rogers, Chris Webb, and Will Webb for the 2011 College Conference. Brian McLaren was one of the main speakers there, and in his workshop one afternoon he posted two pieces of newsprint and asked the group two questions. What are the biggest issues facing the church today? Answers on one sheet. What are the biggest issues facing our world today? Answers on the other. And then he asked the group to look at both. I imagine you're compiling your lists now. Church-declining membership, budgets, buildings in disrepair, leadership. World- hunger and poverty, education, economy, climate change. Brian's point in all of this was to offer the question- should these lists be quite so different from one another? I think this is a game-changer of a question if we are to take it seriously. Like finally picking up that copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

With this in mind let us consider how it is that in a new decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are still 22,000 children who die each day because of poverty?<sup>ii</sup> Where has the church failed to point this out and where *can* the church come in to point to Jesus who spent many hours ministering with the poor?

How is it that in our nation where the dropout rate for white students is 5%, it's nearly 38% combined for black and Hispanic students?<sup>iii</sup> Where has the church failed to point this out, and where *can* the church come in to point to Jesus called Rabbi by Andrew, who spent time teaching in the temple and by the Sea of Galilee, in the valleys and on the mount?

How is it that one in ten young people in our country suffer from mental illness severe enough to cause some impairment and yet only 20% of these have access to or can afford needed treatment?<sup>iv</sup> Where has the church failed to point this out, and where *can* the church come in to point to Jesus who was not afraid to hear and give healing to those held under by forces beyond their control?

How is it that in 2010, there were over 13,000 people just in our neighborhood alone who were hungry and needed assistance feeding their families?<sup>v</sup> Where has the church failed to point this out, and where *can* the church come in to point to Jesus who fed 5000 with a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread?

The conversations we are having as a church are important, don't hear me saying that they are not; and when held honestly and gracefully, are vital to who we say that we are. But how about including as well renewed efforts to address poverty and hunger alleviation, mental illness treatment, and education reform. Imagine were we to "come and see", as he invites Andrew, rather than hesitate with "let's wait and see", diving into issues that are murky and never one-sided, that are uncomfortable and threaten to overwhelm, yet ones that we are led into because we recognize Jesus ministering in all these places.

The former way of being church was to say that wherever the church is, Jesus Christ is- we bring him with us. But the way Jesus is working in the world, the way he is revealed by John the Baptist, it seems that instead we should consider that where Jesus is the church needs to be. Jesus is already there, and we seek to follow.

John the Baptist could not be more clear, "among you is one whom you do not know. I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel". Jesus is only beginning his ministry in these early chapters in John, but we are familiar with where it goes- to the temple to drive out the money collectors, to the well to offer living water to a Samaritan woman, to the Sheep Gate to heal a man ill for thirty-eight years, and on and on to the cross and the empty tomb- where our new life begins. New life that urges us to live gratefully and out loud.

On this weekend when we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr, in this week that marks a full year since the earthquake in Haiti that devastated a country already known to be one of the poorest in the world, in this week as we mourn the unimaginable violence in Tucson, what if we asked ourselves again- where is Jesus calling us to be? Where else might he be revealed? We are not the Messiah, the church is not, I am not, you are not- but together we *are* the body of Christ in the world- scarred, yes, but still alive and kicking.

Have courage, because we are on a journey that can change the very way we perceive the world. Take hope, because where we go Jesus has been and will be. Following the lead of

John the Baptist and keep an eye out, because among us is the one whom we know as the lamb of God, the Son of God, the Messiah, beckoning us to come and see. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter to a Birmingham Jail*.

[http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Global Issues: Global, Political, Economic, and Environmental Issues that Effect Us All.

<http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

<sup>iii</sup> National Center for Education Statistics: U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences.

<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>

<sup>iv</sup> Rand Corporation. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB4541/index1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB4541/index1.html)

<sup>v</sup> Final count for the year of services provided at Noel Memorial UMC Food Pantry