

Being a Sign Post  
John 1:29-42  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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Again today John the Baptist shows up in our scripture. While many of us think of him in connection with the story we heard last week, that of Jesus' baptism, often we don't pay much more attention to the role he played in Jesus' life and ministry, or to who he was as an individual. In fact, I often say that if we were picturing the transition from John to Jesus on stage or screen, we might most often simply expect John to fade into the background while Jesus steps into the foreground.

But it didn't happen that way immediately after the baptism. As with many stories that we read whether in scripture, in history or in our own family lore, there is much that happens between the highlights.

And so, today we are going to spend a little more time with John the Baptist and see what we can learn from him. Because, after all, he is a fascinating character.

If we put together everything that we know about him, we probably picture a scraggly guy, perhaps with hair that looks a bit unkempt and a wild look in his eye, wearing clothing of camel's hair and eating locusts and honey. We picture him wandering about the wilderness, somewhat of a loner in that he lived a life that while in this world was not of this world. So, in many ways he was on his own, but he was also one who preached a powerful word and attracted lots of people. John was, we often forget, a leader and a preacher with his own set of disciples. He was also someone who made the authorities nervous. In fact, so much so that he was beheaded by Herod.

So, while, as Christians, we often talk about John's role in the life of Jesus – especially as the one who baptized Jesus – it is also important to note that he was not only a prop in Jesus' story, but John was a person of great influence and power himself.

And when we remember this, then we remember that not only did John understand himself to be the one who prepared the way for Jesus, but in doing so, John gave some things up. He was a great preacher. He was an influential person of faith in his own right. People were following him. They were listening to him. Had he been someone else, he could have ignored his call to point people toward Jesus and just taken the attention for himself. He certainly had the presence and power to get it. And yet he chose otherwise. He chose to embrace his call to point people toward Jesus, to point people toward the world God intended. He chose to shift the spotlight from himself to another who was among them, from himself to the bigger picture of God's kin-dom.

Living here in Iowa City and being a people who have both coaching as well as fan connections to the Iowa Women's Basketball team, I am reminded of Megan Gustafson. Megan, who graduated from Iowa last year, was a skilled player with many awards and records. While that is admirable, it wasn't what most impressed me. Rather, in talking to people who knew her well, the most impressive thing about Megan is that she wasn't about herself. Instead, she was pointing to something greater than her individual talent. She was a team player. She was happy to divert the attention and to make sure that others got noticed.

Whether we are talking about a Biblical person like John the Baptist, or a young athlete like Megan Gustafson, or just an average person like you or like me, the question of how we use the gifts and skills we have been given and those we have nurtured is an important one. The question of whether we spend our energy drawing attention to ourselves or choose to point to something bigger or more important is worth considering.

And this is what John the Baptist models for us.

While he had the skills and drew the crowds that would allow him to take the stage as the headliner, he seemed to understand that ultimately it was about more than just him. He seemed to understand that he was part of something larger. While he was working to point people to God, he

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also didn't need to be the one at the center, but he was willing to step back in order to give people the space to hear another voice, to see another example...all with the goal of helping them to grow more deeply in relationship with God.

In fact, John was humble enough that he was even willing to point his own disciples toward Jesus and to encourage them to follow when Jesus said "Come and see."

So, what does this have to do with us? Even as we talk about John's ability to set his own ego aside and to point people toward Jesus, it is not unlikely that many of us are still saying, "Well, yes, but it was *Jesus!*" It's not unlikely that we are thinking that if Jesus came along, we would point others to him as well.

But, what does the example of John say to those of us living two thousand years later...those of us who know Jesus in story and in spirit, but not in the same way as John and the disciples? What does the example of John say that helps us to shape how we live as Jesus' followers?

Because whether we think about it or not, we have choices – everyday – about what our lives point toward.

We have the choice to point toward compassion and justice, or we have the choice to point toward fear and self-centeredness.

We have the choice to point toward generosity and simplicity, or we have the choice to point toward accumulation and power.

We have the choice to point toward ourselves and our demands and desires, or we have the choice to point toward God and God's ways.

We have the choice to take the easy way, or we have the choice to point toward God even when doing so causes us to risk something or to give something up.

We might not have the experience of Jesus walking down a street in our neighborhood so that we can say to others, "Look – there is the Lamb of God." But we do have the option, in all that

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we say and do, in how we live and how we interact with friends and strangers, in the ways we work for the betterment of our community and world...in everything we do...we have the option to point people toward a world shaped by the love and grace of God, the world that Jesus worked to create.

If we dismiss John as merely a prop in Jesus' story, as someone who was born to point people toward Jesus and who had no choice but to do so, then not only do we not see the fullness of who John was, but we also make it easy to let ourselves off the hook. Because it was not only John, but each of us, who is called to point people toward a better way. It was not only John, but each of us who is called to help people see the light and love of God, to help build communities of welcome and compassion, to help teach people how to live in ways that honor the God-createdness of each and every person. It was not only John, but it is each of us who is called to live as a sign post, pointing people toward more than our set of beliefs or our definition of faith or our own church community, pointing people toward something much bigger – toward a God who created and loves everyone.

John is to be admired. But if that is all we do, then we miss the point.

May we not only admire, but may we be inspired that we will live as those who help others see the possibilities of living in God's ways. May we use our influence and our power, may we use our whole lives to point people toward God and to live as reminder that we are part of an amazing story that is so much bigger than any one of us. Amen.