

Pastor Josh Ferris

Sermon 6.5.16

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Galatians 1:11-24 | **Luke 7:18-35**

Things are *not* going well for John the Baptist. Everything had started out fine. He'd been sent out into the wilderness near the Jordan River for one purpose: to help people get ready for Jesus. That was his whole mission. He told people that Jesus was coming, that God's kingdom was coming, and that the right way to get ready was to repent and to turn back to God by living kind and generous lives towards others. This is what John told them, and people listened. A lot of people. In fact, so many people came out to listen and be baptized that he was given a nickname – *John the Baptist*.

People from far and wide came to see him, and everyone knew about him. He gained a following of his own. A group of disciples. But even with all the success and attention, John remembered *that it wasn't about him*. He constantly told people, "I baptize you with water...but there's something more powerful coming, and I'm not even worthy to carry his sandals." (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16) When Jesus finally showed up, it meant that John would lose a lot of his following, that his time in the spotlight would end. People thought he would be upset, but he said, "[I told you] 'I am not the Messiah, but have been sent ahead of him.' He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:28, 30)

Basically what I'm saying is that John was a selfless, faithful prophet, who did exactly what God called him to do, and then willingly stepped aside when Jesus showed up, and he faded into the background. But he didn't stop being a prophet.

He still heard God's call to speak the truth to power, and as a result, the same thing happened to him that happens to most prophets – he made powerful people angry. At the time a man named Herod Antipas ruled as a sort of king over the area, placed there by the Roman Empire to keep the peace. One day Herod decided he didn't want his wife any longer, so he divorced her to get rid of her, and he went and married his brother's wife instead. John the Baptist publicly pointed out that Herod's actions weren't just creepy and disgusting, they were also sinful and wrong. (see Leviticus 18:16) And Herod, like most rulers, didn't like being publicly criticized, so he had John thrown in jail.

He was stuck. He couldn't let John free, because he knew that John would keep calling him out in public. But he also couldn't quite bring himself to kill John, because he knew that John was a righteous and holy man. (Mark 6:20) So Herod just left John in jail to rot.

And now things are pretty bad. This faithful, selfless prophet is in prison. Life feels dark and hopeless. He's scared and depressed. He's frustrated and angry. He's beginning to have doubts. He's hit rock bottom, and he's wondering if it's worth it. Wondering if proclaiming the message about Jesus was worth this price. Wondering if Jesus is really who he claims to be, if he really *is* bringing God's kingdom, if he really *is* bringing salvation and forgiveness and new life to people. He's wondering if Jesus is the real deal.

So in this morning's reading John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus a simple question: "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (v. 20) John is saying, "*Jesus, please tell me that this is worth it. Please tell me that you are who you claim to be, the one we've been waiting for. Please tell me that you're the real deal, because I need some hope.*"

And Jesus responds with a simple answer. He tells these two disciples that they should go back to John and tell him what they've experienced and seen Jesus do. They'd watched Jesus bring sight to the blind, help the lame walk, and heal lepers. They were there as he made the deaf hear and the dead rise and brought good news to the poor. And now Jesus tells them that they should share *their* stories of what they'd seen Jesus do, their experiences of the difference that Jesus made, first-hand.

That's it. He says they should tell John their stories about Jesus.

I know that the idea of evangelism makes a lot of people uncomfortable. When you hear that word – evangelism – maybe you think about street preachers or Bible thumping or heavy-handed high-pressure sales tactics. Many of us don't feel comfortable sharing our faith or talking about Jesus to other people. Part of our discomfort is just something we need to get over, because we've been given a great commission by Jesus himself, to go out into all the corners the world and make disciples and share the Good News of Jesus with people. But part of our discomfort is that most of us don't really know *how* to share Jesus with people, or *how* to talk about our faith.

And that's why I love this morning's reading so much. Jesus tells these disciples that sharing the Good News, talking about your faith, is as simple as telling *your* story of Jesus. It's as simple as sharing what Jesus has done in your life, just telling the story of how your faith in Jesus has made a difference in life.

You see, I've just become convinced that there are so few people in this world who are going to start believing in Jesus because of overwhelming logical arguments or philosophical reasoning. The Bible-beating and debating and highbrow theology just isn't an effective

evangelism tool in today's world, and I'm not sure that it ever was. But keeping our mouths shut and never talking about our faith isn't too effective either.

In today's pluralistic society, people can choose – like never before! – between so many different religions and faiths that it's overwhelming. And recently, more than ever before in our nation, people are choosing to *not* associate with any specific faith. More and more I've encountered who are “spiritual but not religious” or who have faith but don't identify with any organized religion. It's clear that the landscape of faith and religion is changing in our country, but I honestly don't think it's because people no longer care about faith or spirituality or the deep questions of life.

Instead, I think that as people are faced with the struggles and doubts of life, they're looking at religion and faith and asking the same question that John the Baptist asked Jesus. They're asking, “Is this the real deal or not?”

People want to know if Jesus really *does* offer forgiveness and freedom and new life. These are things people want to experience. And in the midst of all the different religions someone can practice, all the things that a person can believe, all the lifestyles that an individual can choose to live, people just want to know if having faith in Jesus makes any difference in life, if following his teachings and living by his way leads to a more fulfilling and purposeful life or not. People want to know if Christianity – if Jesus – is the real deal.

And I'm convinced that the best way to answer that question is not with Bible verses or arguments or philosophy, but *to share your story of Jesus*. To share how Jesus had made a difference in *your* life, to tell the story of how following Jesus has allowed *you* to experience grace and freedom and forgiveness. People are desperate to hear genuine and honest stories

about faith from people they trust. Stories are powerful things. They bind people together. Stories help us to hear and see one another, and even to hear and see God.

All around us, people are experiencing John-the-Baptist-type moments. Times of fear and doubt, when they need some hope to cling to. Maybe it's the friend who was laid off and tells you they feel lost. Or the co-worker who shares that they're trying to come to terms with the diagnosis. Maybe it's the classmate who admits she's having a hard time at home and doesn't know where to turn. The friend who confides that their marriage is on the rocks. The person who tells you about the guilt they've been carrying because of what they did, or the person who tells you that life feels hopeless and meaningless, or the fellow parent who admits that they feel overwhelmed and are worried about their kids.

These are the moments, like John's disciples coming to Jesus, when people are looking for meaning and direction, for purpose and hope. And these are opportunities for us – not to preach, not to pressure, not to debate or argue, but to share our stories of Jesus. To just tell a story about a time when faith helped *you* through a rough patch. To tell the story of how spending time praying to God helps *you* to feel a sense of peace and purpose. To talk about the way that being part of a church community makes *you* feel supported and loved. To share how *you've* experienced forgiveness and grace through Jesus.

These are opportunities to tell your stories about Jesus.

And you have a story to tell. One of my favorite songs goes like this:

*Got a picture in my head today
of how heaven might look someday
I see the people there, so I pull up a chair
And their stories, they blow me away*

'Cause I can see it on every face

*The evidence of grace
And as I listen it occurs to me
That everyone's got their own story*

*So what's your story about His glory?
You gotta find your place in the history of grace!*

Whether you've thought about it before or not, whether you've told your stories of Jesus before or not, your life *is* part of the grand tapestry of grace and love and forgiveness that God is weaving into creation. You don't have to have all the answers to tell that story, you can simply share *your* experience of God's magnificent love, *your* story of how faith has made a difference in life. It's the most important story you can tell, and God is giving you opportunities to share it. And though it seems scary, just like every other story, the more we tell it, the *better* we tell it. Amen.