

The First Church of Evans
Sunday, July 12, 2020
10am Service

Greetings from Jerusalem Corners,

This morning will mark the second Sunday on a journey toward what our worship services will become as the year goes on and conditions change. I want to thank Cindy Fanara for organizing our services as well as Carl Mende, Gail Galfo, and Jason Justinger for being willing to assist with teaching and preaching on Sunday mornings during the months of July and August. And thanks to all of you who will join us in worship both here in our sanctuary and from your own homes.

Call to Worship

Matthew 11:1-6

Pam Panfil

*When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their towns.
And when John the Baptist heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples
and said to him, "Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?"
And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight and the lame walk,
lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.
And blessed is the one who does not stumble over me."*

Hymn

"Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"

Choir Members

An Opening Prayer

Holy and Almighty Father,

You are the One who, since the day our ancestors left the Garden, has called men and women like us to be your own and to live in your love and forgiveness. Please forgive us when we resist your call and make little of the love you offer us. Fill us with your Spirit to see Jesus as that Savior whose love can make us whole; through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Devotional

Matthew 11:7-15

Pastor Stephen Ridge

*As John's disciples went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John the Baptist,
"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see?
A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those dressed in soft clothing are in kings' houses.
What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet! This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold I send my
messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you'
Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.
Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

It has often struck me that, though God's Word teaches all sorts of wonderful things, they often come to us in complicated human stories. In today's story, Jesus and his men are loose out in the countryside and wonderful things are happening. We read it in our Call to Worship! The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead rise, the poor are given hope, but John the Baptist waits in Herod's dungeon, hoping that Jesus the man he baptized, will remember him and save him. So John sends to Jesus from prison and asks, "Are you the One who is to come, or do we wait for another?"

And Jesus sends the messengers back, saying what to John must have sounded like, "I'm too busy saving the world to bother with you, but "...blessed is the one who doesn't stumble over me." So like a lot of us, John was looking for a kind of salvation that Jesus didn't come to offer, not in this life. But when John's messengers leave, we find out that the Baptist in prison weighed more in Jesus' heart than his actions would lead us to think. Jesus says to the crowds, "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed shaken by the wind? A prince in fine clothing? A prophet...more than a prophet! This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'"

Why might John stumble? Because God sent John to take the point, to run in advance the course that Jesus will have to take in his turn. You see, John thought he was setting the stage for a King on his way to a throne, but in fact John was marching point in front of a Savior on his way to a cross. So only after John loses his head will Jesus ever get nailed to a cross.

And in both cases, it's out of love. John will brave the dungeon and the sword and Jesus will brave the cross and the nails, out of love for a Bride that John must defend and Jesus must save. You see, there is this theme that runs all through the Old Testament where God sends bridegrooms to act as saviors for the women they marry. And the bridegroom seldom shows up alone, but he sends a friend in advance of the wedding to get things ready, to make sure the bride understands what she's getting into.

And the whole business is meant to draw us a picture of Christ as that Bridegroom who will lead us all back into God's good graces. So John the Baptist was Christ's friend, the best man God sent to make sure God's people were ready to love and welcome a Savior, just as Moses got Israel ready for Joshua, just as Samuel got Israel ready for David, just as Mordecai got Esther ready for her bridegroom.

This is why Jesus calls John the Baptist the greatest "among those born of women" because John was the friend, the best man, of God's own Son. John is the ultimate friend, better than Moses or Samuel or Mordecai because Jesus is the ultimate Savior. And Jesus says that we, the "least" of us, are greater than John, not because we're better people than John, but because we are the Bride Jesus came to love and save. The best man is a Bridegroom's closest friend only till the Bride shows up.

Offering Acts 20:35 "...remember the words of the Lord Jesus, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

The offering baskets are placed on the way out of the sanctuary, or you can mail your offering from home to:
The First Church of Evans, Attn: Cindy Fanara, P.O. Box 364, Derby, NY, 14047.

Prayer Matthew 7:7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."

Please keep the governing authorities in prayer that they make wise decisions in response to the pandemic and to social unrest. Please keep our medical people and other first line public servants and their families in prayer as they selflessly face danger to save the lives of sick and vulnerable people. Please pray for our elderly loved ones who are at home or in care facilities, and remember those people who have lost loved ones. Please pray for Jean Hill and Richard Pearson who are still in the hospital and for Don Waddell's father, Ernie, who has just received a cancer diagnosis.

Hymn

"As The Deer"

Choir Members

An Ancient Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift his countenance upon you and give you his peace."

Mid-Week Personal Devotional
The Bride Belongs to the Bridegroom

John 3:25-30

Now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a certain Jew over purification. And they came to John the Baptist and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, the one to whom you bore witness - look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him!" John answered, "A man cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, "I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him." The One who has the Bride is the Bridegroom. The friend of the Bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the Bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

One of the ways that John's gospel is different from the others is in John the Apostle's treatment of John the Baptist. The other three gospels land the Baptist in prison by the time Jesus embarks on a public ministry, but John the Apostle remembers a brief stretch of time when Jesus and the Baptist both were teaching and baptizing just a few miles apart along the banks of the Jordan. And here in John's gospel, the sight of a carpenter baptizing people immediately leads to controversy.

You see, John the Baptist was the son of a priest. And in old Israel, it was the job of a priest to pronounce someone spiritually clean after he'd taken a ritual bath. What did Jesus always say to lepers he had healed? Go to the priest and he'll declare you clean. So it was natural after a sinner bathed in the Jordan for the Baptist who was a priest to pronounce the person clean, forgiven! But Jesus was no priest, he was from the wrong tribe, he was a carpenter, the wrong line of work to be declaring anybody clean.

So some tidy Jew ran down river to John the Baptist to point out to John's disciples that an imposter was in play, namely Jesus. Which was a conundrum because the disciples of the Baptist knew that Jesus was no impostor. They said to John, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, behold, he's baptizing, and all are going to him!" So they knew Jesus was for real! John had taught them that! But they didn't understand how a non-priest could get involved in baptizing people and declaring them clean. And John's response was to change the subject. The Baptist said, "A man can receive nothing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom...!'

Now prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel had often pictured old Israel as a bride betrothed to Israel's God. So what John sees in Christ is someone sent from God whose role entirely transcends what Moses taught about washing and forgiveness. "The bride belongs to the bridegroom," John says and God's people belong to God's Son. For all of old Israel's history, God's people had been engaged to the God who loved them and chose them. And now, the Baptist was teaching, God the Son himself, the Bridegroom, had come to collect his bride and show her the way to the wedding and the banquet.

And John saw himself as a best man, "...the friend of the bridegroom," John said, "who stands and hears him and rejoices greatly...". You see, there is this theme that runs all through the Old Testament of God sending bridegrooms to be saviors for the women they marry. And the bridegroom seldom shows up alone, but he sends a friend before the wedding to get things ready, to make sure the bride understands what she's getting into. Sometimes it's a woman, a single bride, like Rachel in Genesis, or Esther in Persia, But more often the Bride is the whole people of Israel. So Moses got Israel ready for a bridegroom, Joshua, and Samuel got Israel ready for a bridegroom, David.

Now the downside to being a Friend of the Bridegroom is that best men are only on stage for a moment and they are never center stage. So John explains to his disciples, "...the friend of the bridegroom stands and hears the bridegroom's voice and rejoices greatly. This joy which is mine is now complete. He must increase, and I must decrease." So to be the friend of Jesus, to love and serve his Bride, is to give ourselves away and trust God to make something of the sacrifice. John did it for Jesus. Jesus did it for us. And now it is our turn to do it for Christ and for each other.

A Prayer to the Bridegroom

O LOVER TO THE UTTERMOST,

May I read the meltings of your heart to me
in the manger of your birth, in the garden of your agony,
in the cross of your suffering, in the tomb of your resurrection,
in the heaven of your intercession.

Bold in this thought, I defy my adversary,
tread down his temptations, resist his schemings,
renounce the world, am valiant for truth.

Deepen in me a sense of my holy relationship to you,
as spiritual Bridegroom, as Jehovah's Fellow, as sinner's Friend.

I think of your glory and my vileness, your majesty and my meanness,
your beauty and my deformity, your purity and my filth,
your righteousness and my iniquity.

You have loved me everlastingly, unchangeably; may I love you as I am loved.

You have given yourself for me, may I give myself to you.

You have died for me, may I live to you,
in every moment of time, in every movement of my mind,
in every pulse of my heart.

May I never dally with the world and its allurements,
but walk by your side, listen to your voice, be clothed with your graces,
and adorned with your righteousness.¹

¹ Paraphrased from p. 32, The Valley of Vision, Edited by Arthur Bennett, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2019