

**A Really Nice Guy**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
The Second Sunday of Advent, Year A  
*Matthew 3:1-12*

“But still, he *is* a really nice guy.”

There they are. Those tell-tale words. The words we use too often use to soften the unkind things we say about others. You know what I mean. Somewhere around kindergarten, most of us learned that it’s important to always be polite, to avoid talking about someone, to not say mean things. And likely at some point early on, your mom or your dad or a teacher admonished you that if you don’t have something nice to say, better not to say anything. But then, sometime a little later – and let’s be honest, that was usually before we finished first grade – most of us learned creative ways to get around what we learned in kindergarten, usually by covering whatever critical or unkind things we just said by ending with the ubiquitous, “But still, he *is* a really nice guy.”

Well, here we are, about two weeks into Advent, and I have a feeling the reading we just heard is a biblical version of, “But he *is* a really nice guy.” I mean, from all I can tell, it sure looks like the gospel writers don’t quite know what to make of John the Baptist. And, frankly, I can’t blame them. Think about it: These guys are writing the story of Jesus and right up front they have to deal with John. John who is, in many ways, a little too much like Jesus for comfort. After all, and as we just heard, John, too, attracted crowds and disciples. John, too, provoked the religious leaders. John, too, is eventually killed by the ruling authorities (and some, later, will wonder if he’s been raised from the dead). And if all that’s not enough, John baptizes Jesus. Shouldn’t that’ve been the other way around? I mean, isn’t it usually the teacher who baptizes the follower, not the reverse. Talk about awkward!

Now clearly, John made a splash (no pun intended), left an indelible impression, became too important a figure to leave out of the story. And so each of the evangelists has to figure out a way to take this Messiah look-alike and fit him into their gospel without having him upstage Jesus. Mark, as characteristically succinct as ever, takes the most straightforward route and in a handful of verse just plain claims John as the fulfillment of prophecy, the one who heralds the coming Messiah. Pretty good. John – the fourth evangelist, that is, not the Baptist – John is shamelessly bold, as he records the Baptist confessing – or is it un-confessing? – that he is not the Messiah not just once, but twice (just in case anyone was confused). Luke, for my money, is by far the cleverest of the bunch, as he names John as Jesus’ cousin and then has him give testimony to his younger and superior relative from his mother’s womb. Talk about creative! And then there’s Matthew. Matthew who surely struggled in kindergarten, who never quite learned to voice his feelings appropriately, who sometimes doesn’t even remember to

say “But he is a really nice guy.” Goodness, but after hearing this passage don’tcha kinda wonder whether Matthew likes John at all.

I mean, on the whole, Matthew’s characterization of John’s preaching is pretty severe, as in, like, unrelenting fire and brimstone. True, Luke offers much the same, though Luke’s John at least gives the people some hope, inviting them to offer what little they have in response to his call to repentance. Not so with Matthew, whose John the Baptist employs an apparently effective if somewhat predictable two-step preaching formula of repentance, threat, repeat.

Take, for instance, Matthew’s description of John’s encounter with the Pharisees. Good night, but he’s harsh: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?!” Which made me wonder: Maybe Matthew’s trying to make Jesus look better by contrast. You know, have John give ‘em hell so that Jesus seems so much kinder and gentler by comparison? As tempting as that interpretation is, though, it doesn’t hold up, as later in his story, Matthew records Jesus saying things just as fierce, if not more so, and for 36 verses, instead of just 4! (check out Mt. 23:1-36)

Well, then I thought maybe Matthew is trying to set John up for a fall. You know, have John be all fiery and bold in this passage but a little later, and as we’ll hear next week, show him to have feet of clay after all by describing his doubts about whether Jesus is really the messiah. Except that doesn’t hold up either, as Matthew records Jesus himself saying that John is the greatest of the prophets.

So what’s gives? To be honest, I’m not sure. I mean, it’s actually rather striking, when you think about it, that Matthew portrays not one glimmer of grace in John’s preaching. Mark and Luke, by comparison, though also depicting John’s clothes, cuisine, and cutting rhetoric in similar detail, yet nevertheless both describe John as proclaiming “a baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*” (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). Not so Matthew, who only reports John’s terse sermon as, “Repent!” (1:2). *No forgiveness. Nothing. Nada.*

But what if that’s Matthew’s point all along? What if, that is, it’s not that Matthew doesn’t *like* John, it’s just that he wants us to be certain about who and what John is – the forerunner, the one who points to Christ, for sure, but also the one who not only calls our attention to Jesus but creates in us a hunger for him. Don’t look to John for forgiveness, Matthew implores, because you won’t find it.

If you read further along in Matthew’s story, there’s another place he diverges from the script that Mark and Luke also follow closely. This time we’re in Jerusalem, rather than at the Jordon, at the Last Supper, where Jesus, gathered with his friends, shares himself as fully and completely as one can. Lifting a loaf of bread, Jesus says, “Take and eat. This is my body.” And then, offering them a cup, he tells them to drink, explaining, “This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” And there it is. Right there. Did you catch it? In Mark, Luke, and, for that matter, Paul (in 1 Cor.

chapter 11), there is no mention of “forgiveness of sins” connected with this scene. Matthew, it seems, has taken the phrase he tore out of the popular description of John’s preaching and pasted it right here, at the climax of our Lord’s Supper.

No. It’s not that Matthew doesn’t like John. It’s that Matthew believes John only has half the story. Repentance, remorse, turning back, longing for restoration – these are important themes, themes that John preaches with passion and that Jesus will also give voice. But it all comes to nothing if there isn’t the promise of forgiveness at the end, the promise of grace, and for that promise, Matthew wants to be clear, we have to look to Jesus.

Advent, of course, is all about waiting and watching, preparing and repenting. And few could do better than gnarly old John to remind us why this important. I mean, my word, but in our 24/7 world of immediate access and instant gratification surely we need John’s call to watch and wait, to turn around and repent. But Matthew invites us also to ask, what is it that we’re watching, waiting, and preparing for? And where do we find the courage and hope to repent? For Matthew, the matter is terribly straightforward: it’s Jesus, always and only Jesus, the one who judges in order to forgive, accuses in order to justify, gives law in order to show grace, and dies that we might have life.

So is John really a nice guy after all? And does Matthew like him or not? Truth be told, I’m still not sure. But more importantly, I do believe that, Matthew, faithful Christian scribe that he is, loves the law John bears because he sees in it the clearest indication of God’s will for us and our best hope for caring for each other and this world. Yet Jesus is not just the fulfiller of the law, for Matthew, he is also its fulfillment. For in Jesus God’s love comes down and is made manifest so that all those things that John and Isaiah, Elijah and Moses, and all the law and the prophets pointed to finally becomes clear.

And so here we are, a week or two into Advent, invited to stand between the Baptist and the Babe, caught amid the wreckage of our failed plans and schemes yet also called to look with hope toward Bethlehem’s manger where, if we listen carefully, we’ll hear the husky cry of a newborn sucking in his first breath of the same air we all need to breathe and grasping for his mother’s breast seeking the nourishment common to us all. And in this way, this vulnerable child signals through his very flesh and blood that God most surely is with us and for us – Emmanuel – now and forever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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