

Leftovers and Cousins

As you all know, I've spent most of my preaching time in the last three years exploring alternative lectionaries, those lists of suggested Bible passages for the preacher to use to preach Sunday by Sunday. The primary reason I gave was that I'd pretty much covered the readings in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary having gone through it with you all four times in the prior twelve years. But, in fact, there are a few leftover passages that, through oddities of timing or by my choice, I'd not yet dealt with.

This oddly hoppedscotched passage which I've just read with you is one of those. It's surprising, in a way that I've not explored these verses with you, as the first part of the First Chapter of John's Gospel is one of my favorite passages. But, like many folks, I tend to focus on all the juicy stuff about the Word and neglect the portions that seem out of place — John the Evangelist's oddly interspersed story about another John, the one we call the Baptist or, more properly, the Baptizer. And so, harkening back a couple of weeks to when our stomachs were full of Thanksgiving turkey and our hearts full of memories of Thanksgivings past when we could gather with family unimpeded by the pandemic, I'm calling this sermon "Leftovers and Cousins." John was, after all, according to Luke, Jesus' cousin and this is a leftover passage. And drawing on those parallels, I'm going to point us toward the traditional theme of this third week of Advent, which is joy.

To start with, let's get in a "leftovers and cousins" mood. This is a good time of year for both topics, don't you think? When I was a boy, my family of origin usually spent Thanksgiving with my mother's side of the family in Arkansas, in Twentythree, Arkansas, to be precise, and Christmas with my dad's side of the family, either at my grandmother's house in Herculaneum, Missouri, or at our house in Kirkwood, Missouri, or, once, when I was home from college, at my Uncle Bob's house in Pevely, Missouri. Inevitably, those were occasions of great feasting but, of course, as kids we couldn't wait to be dismissed from our table and head outside or to another room to run around and play with our cousins. That meant that we didn't really eat our fill the first time around — although who knows what "full" is for a child — and always showed up in the kitchen later begging for leftovers. There was nothing quite so satisfying as sitting down to a second helping of everything (including pies) after rambunctious activity while our parents were talking, watching football, and swearing they'd not eat for a week, all while casting amazed but covetous eyes at our plates. Oh, those were great days for leftovers, let me tell you.

Of course, all of us were well-loved and well-fed the rest of the year, too. And while the presents at Christmas were a huge part of the experience, well, one got presents on one's birthday, as well. But we weren't together as often with our cousins as we'd have liked, any of us. There's a popular wisdom that says our cousins are our first and our best playmates and I think there's a lot of truth to that. I had older cousins on the Boyer side to look up to — Brenda, Tom Ray, and Cindy — and younger cousins on both sides to tease and boss around — Roxanne, Barry, Travis, Ricky, Tami, and Jimmy. But, oh, my goodness, my cousins who were just about my age — Kim, Tonya, Deena, and second cousins Tommie Jo and Charlotte — those were my special pals, along with my aunt and uncle who were just three years older than me, the twins, Denny and Denise. What fun we had together! What joy is still in those memories! Somehow, the times we had together were all the more special because we weren't together all the time.

I wonder if it was the same for Jesus and John? Only six months apart, they would have been natural playfellows. Of course, their times together would have been limited as well, with Jesus growing up in Nazareth of Galilee and John in the hills of Judaea. But surely, they must have met up from time to time, especially when both families went to Jerusalem. The story of the boy Jesus in the Temple at the end of the second chapter of Luke implies that Joseph and Mary's family went annually to Jerusalem for Passover. Did Zachariah and Elizabeth meet them there? Did they swing by Zachariah's house on their way to travel together? We cannot know but if Mary were so close to Elizabeth as to go to her with the news of her pregnancy, surely the two women continued to see each other when they could and, with the mamas, the boys.

Of course, The Gospel According to Luke is the only one with those stories of family connection between John and Jesus. At no point does the grown-up John show any knowledge of Jesus' miraculous origins or much sense of his destiny. Only in the Gospel According to Matthew does John show any sign of recognizing anything special about Jesus before he baptizes him and, in our passage this morning, seems to not even know Jesus. Either it's been a long time since the cousins saw each other or Luke doesn't have his story straight. But we must always remember that the gospels were written by different authors for different audiences and with different agendas. The ways in which the stories of Jesus' baptism are told differently may not have the slightest bearing on the family connection between John and Jesus.

Some scholars pooh-poo the family connection or even any kind of relationship between John and Jesus. Their claim is that these stories are manufactured by the Gospel writers to mollify the followers of John who were upset that the "new guy" eventually overshadowed their teacher. In a section of the Gospel of John, chapter 1, after our reading for this morning, John himself sends two of his disciples to follow Jesus. One is Andrew, who then goes to tell his brother Simon about the new teacher. Clearly, some of John's disciples turned to following Jesus with joy. But there were others that had a problem with the switch. The Synoptic Gospels record a couple of incidents which imply some friction between John's disciples and Jesus. In Luke 7 and Matthew 11, we find the story of how some of John's disciples, perhaps sent by John himself, came to challenge Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus' response: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." In another incident, recorded in all three of the Synoptics, John's disciples challenge Jesus about the spiritual practices of Jesus and his disciples: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" "And Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'" At least in the eyes of some of John's disciples, there was a rivalry between the two teachers.

But whether they were cousins or not, it's clear that no such rivalry existed for John. In all four Gospels, he is presented as a supporter of Jesus and his ministry, even if he did have questions. Let's start with what scholars believe is the oldest Gospel, the Gospel According to Mark. In chapter 1, verses 7 & 8, Mark writes of John: "He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" Matthew includes

these same words in his introduction of John's ministry but adds to them. John says, regarding Jesus: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." This is often interpreted as the threat of Hell for non-believers; I think it's more about burning away our impurities with the Holy Spirit, but that's another sermon.

Matthew also includes John's support of Jesus in his telling of Jesus' baptism, in the next verses: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented." I've talked about Jesus' possible rationales for this decision in past sermons on baptism but what interests me this morning is John's initial demurral. Wherever the author of the First Gospel got this story, it was clearly meant to convey John's immediate support of Jesus.

Since it is in Luke's Gospel that we learn the family ties between John and Jesus, you might think that he would call out that relationship in his version of the baptism, or at least include the material that we just heard from Matthew. You might think that, but you would be wrong. While Luke gives us the most extensive quotation of John's preaching, he fails to mention John's words to Jesus at the baptism. It's as if, having established the positive relationship between the two teachers with his story of Mary and Elizabeth, Luke feels he doesn't need to smooth things over between the rival groups of disciples any further.

So, it is actually in our passage for this morning from the Gospel According to John that we get the Baptizer's most eloquent and straightforward endorsement of the teacher from Nazareth. The author of the Fourth Gospel puts his own spin on the Baptizer's proclamation. As the prologue of the Fourth Gospel is focused on the pre-existence of the Word, so do John the Baptist's words contribute to that idea: "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." Then, a few verses later, the Baptizer is quoted in a more familiar form: "I baptize with water. 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."

In the next verses, not a part of this morning's reading, John goes on to further endorse Jesus, whom he apparently does not know, and tells the story of the baptism: "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.'" In the next section, as already mentioned, John sends two of his own disciples to join Jesus after identifying him again as "the Lamb of God."

Now, we could spend quite some time analyzing the similarities and differences in these passages about John and Jesus, but that's not really the point I want to make this morning.

Leftovers and Cousins

Whether or not John and Jesus were cousins, and being the sentimental type that I am, I'm going to keep assuming they were, there is an obvious joy that shines through in John's references to Jesus. Even if the only relationship between the two men was that of a prophet and the one he foretold, imagine what a joy to John it must have been to recognize in Jesus the physical presence of the one for whom he was called to be a forerunner. Sometimes, in our professional lives, we are called to fill in at certain tasks until someone can be hired to take them on full time. Or we can be temporarily elevated in position until the new boss arrives. When we're in one of those situations, how great our joy when the burden is lifted from our shoulders and given to someone in whom we have confidence that they will get the job done better than we could due to their experience or talent or for some other good reason. Take that feeling and multiply it by an enormous factor to imagine John's joy that God had indeed sent the One that God had promised. John knew that his calling was prepare the way for the Lord; in Jesus, John saw the Lord come at last.

But isn't it wonderful to assume that Luke had the goods and that when Jesus came for baptism, John recognized at last that his "little cousin," his lifetime playmate and friend, was in fact the Messiah? I'm always thrilled to hear good news from my cousins – not that any of them have ever had news like that! I have celebrated my cousins' marriages and grieved when those marriages didn't work out or ended in death. I've rejoiced in the births of their children. I've cheered when they graduated and gotten new jobs and even, recently, when my cousin Cindy stopped smoking after fifty years. But how amazing it must have been for John to realize that his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, was the One chosen by God to save all people.

Friends, in this plague year of 2020, we have had precious few reasons for joy. We have hope, now, that vaccines will soon bring the pandemic to an end, just as we have hope that the recent elections will provide our nation with a refreshed civility and sense of commonweal. But unless your family has welcomed a new child, or experienced a positive job change or graduation, or perhaps a miraculous healing, there have not been many occasions for joy. So now, hear the Good News: "unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." John prepared the way, and the Lord came. "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Our time of joy has arrived! Thanks be to God!