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John 3:22-36
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It's been a while since I've shown a movie clip.

I like movie clips because movies communicate values through powerful, provocative story-telling. They provide a window into the attitudes and values of the culture that we live in. I haven't used any yet this series, and I'm worried that I'm starting to lose my reputation. Since this is my last sermon for a while I figured I better have a movie clip.

So I started looking for a movie clip to illustrate the idea that our culture values ambition, competitiveness, pride, and rising to the top. Seems like an impossible task, right? How could I ever find an example of Hollywood promoting those values?

I asked for help on *Facebook* and got a ton of responses. The truth is that there are examples of this from every movie genre and every generation. There's the instant fame of Lightning McQueen from *Cars* or the rousing song of Timba from *The Lion King*, "I Just Can't Wait to be King." There is the ambition in *The Social Network* describing the rise of Facebook. Whole movies deal with this theme, like the *Godfather* and *The Devil Wears Prada*.

So many options. Which clip should I go with? Well, I decided to go classic. This clip is from the movie *Wall Street* and is of a speech by Gordon Gekko, a fictional archetypal hustler; and big-time trader/speculator/corporate raider. It's a speech about greed, which isn't exactly the same as ambition, but it all comes from the same source. Incidentally, this movie is being remade as *The Wolf of Wall Street* which is set to be released in November.

So here's Gordon Gekko's famous speech as he gave it to the shareholders' meeting of Teldar Paper, a company he is planning to take over. "Greed is good."

Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures, the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind and greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A.¹

This is the world we live in. It's all about getting to the top. Advancing to the next level. Beating our competition.

We want to advance. The goal of most people in a professional sense is to be upwardly mobile. To make it. To succeed.

This morning we are continuing our ten month series in the gospel of John called *Signs of Life*. We are working our way through this incredible book and seeing how Jesus is portrayed as the source of life to the world. This gospel author uses signs to demonstrate the identity of Jesus. His goal is that people believe in Jesus based on these signs and find life through their faith.

Several weeks ago we met an individual who introduced Jesus to us. His name was John the Baptist. Today, he comes back into the story as a kind of bookend to the beginning of Jesus' story. Before concluding the first section of this gospel, the author wants to return to this individual who kicked it off.

John the Baptist broke some of our categories when we met him the first time. We'll see the same thing today. In particular John the Baptist will demonstrate a very different way of approaching the world than we are familiar with. Instead of competing, and rising, and developing, we'll see John descending, declining, and deferring. Everyone in our world wants to be upwardly mobile: to get to the next stage or level. But John the Baptist is the opposite. He's downwardly mobile.

It's a good way to end the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John said some incredible things about Jesus the first time. He called him the Lamb of God. He said that Jesus ranked higher than him because he existed before him. He said that the Spirit of God identified him. Finally, he called him the Son of God.

So John obviously thinks highly of Jesus. But this week, we see what happens when those ideas are put to the test. It's a great thing to introduce the king. You get to share in the spotlight, even if just for a moment. But what happens when the spotlight moves on? That's what we'll find out this morning.

This is where John the Baptist really shines. This story describes a scene that most of us are familiar with, but John's response is remarkable. It's something that we almost never see in our world. But it will have the effect of drawing us toward John. We will want to know what John's secret

is. Then our author will step in and give us what we want. He will explain how all of this was able to happen.

Our passage for this morning is John 3:22-36. Just like last week, this passage begins as a conversation. That conversation sets up the scene and then we see John react. After that, the author provides some theological reflections on what we've just seen. It's a familiar enough pattern: a story and some reflection.

As you listen to this story, try to find yourself in the place of John the Baptist. Think about how you might respond. Think about situations you have faced or are facing. Ask God how John the Baptist might be a model for you.

So let's hear about John the Baptist and find out: Is greed good? Is there another way?

The Setup

The story begins with a setup for the story. Here are the first three verses.

John 3:22-24:

²²After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. ²³John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized ²⁴(for John had not yet been put in prison).

We start off by hearing about Jesus after his conversation with Nicodemus heading off into the countryside. Perhaps his purpose is to spend some quality time with his disciples away from the crowds. He was in Jerusalem doing a bunch of signs, but now it seems to be the time to get away. It doesn't totally work though. People were coming out to him in the countryside and he was baptizing them as an initiation into his ministry.

This is the only gospel where we hear about Jesus doing any baptizing. Why was he baptizing? Was this Christian baptism? In the next chapter, there is a clarification that Jesus himself wasn't doing the baptizing: that his followers were. It's probably the case that this was a continuation of the type of baptism that John the Baptist was doing. Not full-on Christian baptism, but an initiation into something new.

The point of the author telling us this comes in the next verse. Verse 23: "John also was baptizing." Jesus was baptizing. John also was baptizing. The implication of these few verses is clear. Toes are being stepped on.

Territory is being challenged. Two individuals are doing the same thing. How is this going to end up?

We love competition. We compete at work. We compete with other drivers as we drive home. And then we relax by watching other people compete on TV whether it's *Football*, *American Idol*, or *The Bachelor*. There is something innate within us: we love to compete.

So when this story gets introduced as a competition, we are instantly interested. How is this going to play out? Who's going to win?

Our author actually gives us a hint right away. We are told that all this happened before John the Baptist gets put in prison. So now we have this foreshadowing that John is going to lose. He and Jesus are competing and it's not going to end well for John the Baptist.

The Conflict

In the next few verses, this gets confirmed. The tension of the story is that John the Baptist is being out-baptized.

John 3:25-26:

²⁵Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. ²⁶And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."

It's not really clear that this debate was about purification. It could be a discussion about the fact that Jesus was baptizing. It could be something altogether different. I think that the reason the author mentions it is to create a connection with the story that happened in the last chapter at the wedding in Cana. The ritual of purification is a distinctly Jewish activity. The jars that held the water that became wine were originally jars used for the Jewish ritual of purification.

So then these people who were having a debate came to John and presented their problem. They say it very clearly. First, they identify the guy they are talking about. It's the guy that used to be with you on the other side of the Jordan. This is a guy that started out on your team. Not just that, but you bore witness about him. You gave him his start. He owes you.

And now, he has crossed over into your turf. He is baptizing. That's your shtick. How dare he do what you are known for. Doesn't he know that you're the baptist!

Even worse, he's winning. Everyone is going to him. You had a really good thing going and we were really popular. Everything was going really well. But now this Jesus guy has come on the scene and he's taking away all our business. He has betrayed us. He's doing our thing. And worst of all: he's winning.

Here is the conflict of the story. John the Baptist is losing. He's losing at his own game.

This is the turning point in the story. There are a lot of options for how John can respond to this. He could send spies to Jesus' baptism party to figure out why they are more popular. He could double his marketing budget. He could decide that he needs to offer new and improved baptizing. There are all sorts of moves that he could make.

Let's take a moment and think about this situation.

Think about a time when you found yourself in a position like John the Baptist. It's not just competition that John was facing. It's his very identity being challenged by Jesus. How he thought of himself. I can just imagine him saying, "Why did he have to go and start baptizing?"

Have you ever had a time when something that you thought was your thing started to be done by someone else? Maybe something that you consider to be a big part of your identity. People used to associate you with this activity. Then someone else started doing it. And maybe they were even doing it better. How did you feel?

How were you tempted to respond? Just like John the Baptist, we have all sorts of options open to us when something like this happens. How were you tempted? To lash out against that person? To knock them down a notch? Redouble your efforts at regaining what you once were? Give up and throw up your hands in frustration?

When have you felt like John? How have you responded?

The thing that makes this so much worse is that both John and Jesus were doing good stuff. They were both doing their part to bring in the kingdom of God. But they found themselves in a competition.

I remember feeling that way when I was a student in college and was part of one of the Christian fellowship groups. It always felt like there was this under-the-table rivalry between the different fellowships. Everyone was aware of it. We even talked about it sometimes. The school newspaper even had a cartoon one year showing the two Christian fellowships having a battle. That's the worst—when Christian groups compete, but it happens way too frequently.

When we face competition like this, we often tend to respond in one of two ways. Sometimes we rise to the competition: stand up stronger and assert ourselves and try to prove who we are or can be. Other times we just crumble. Just give up. Forget about it. I didn't want to win anyway. It's fight or flight. We come out swinging or give up hope.

The Response

What's incredible about this story is that John the Baptist doesn't do either of these things. The way the story is told makes it sound like he is going to lose. But he doesn't fight and he doesn't flee. He chooses a third path. It's a path that is incredibly inspiring. Let's see what he does.

John 3:27-30:

²⁷John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹The 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. ³⁰He must increase, but I must decrease."

John doesn't ramp up the intensity of his competition. He doesn't try to beat Jesus at his game. But he also doesn't back down and give up. He has this incredible confidence in who he is, who Jesus is, and how everything is supposed to play out. He says that Jesus is winning because that is how it is supposed to be. That is how it has to be. And he is excited for that. That's what he wants. He doesn't give up. He refuses to play the game. He essentially says that my losing in this game is winning.

He says that through four distinct ideas. Each of them is a powerful thought. Each of them is completely different from the way people in our culture respond. Let's look at them.

Four Ideas

First, John teaches us to receive.

He says that at our core, we are recipients. We only have what we've been given. We can only receive what God allows us to have. We didn't make ourselves. We can't take what isn't ours. We can only receive.

This statement applies on multiple levels. It applies to

John the Baptist because he was given his ministry for a certain season. It applies to Jesus because he has been given his calling. It applies to those who would follow Jesus because they are receiving the gift of life from heaven.

John is saying that I'm not going to take more than I've been given. I'll simply be thankful for what I have. John the Baptist teaches us to receive.

Next, John teaches us to defer.

He talks about his identity. Even though Jesus is baptizing, it doesn't challenge him. He knows who he is.

He reminds his disciples that they have heard him talk about himself. He has made it clear that he is only a herald of the one. It's not as if John had been deceiving anyone or pretending to be anyone else. He told them clearly that he was only here to introduce someone greater than himself.

So when that person comes on the scene, how could he do anything except defer to him? Jesus can't threaten John's identity, because John's identity is to announce him. John knows who he is and who he isn't and how he fits into the whole system. He defers to Jesus as the Christ. John the Baptist teaches us to defer.

Thirdly, John teaches us to accept.

He talks about his situation by using the analogy of a wedding. We should note that it is no accident that he uses this imagery. We are reminded of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding in Cana. The emotions, expectations, and associations of a wedding are imported into this situation. Our author is trying to tie all these stories together in subtle ways.

John draws a comparison between Jesus as the groom and John the Baptist as the best man. The role of the best man in the ancient near East was to figure out the logistics of the wedding. He did a lot of the planning. Based on the best men that I've known, I'm pretty sure that weddings would look a lot different than they do if they were in charge of them. During the ceremony itself, the best man brings the bride to the groom.

John says that he knows his role. And he's thrilled to have his role. He is excited to bring the bride to the groom. He rejoices to hear about this couple coming together. He brings them together and then steps away. The best man doesn't try to steal the bride. I think I've seen movies where that happens and it is a terrible thing. It's betrayal. It's treason. The best man has a role to play. It's a great role. It's an honored role. But he isn't the groom.

John the Baptist knows his role and he's content with it. He accepts his place in the story. John the Baptist teaches us to accept the role God has given us.

Finally, John teaches us to decrease.

John's last statement is a grand conclusion. It is one of the most powerful statements that a character in the Bible makes. It's why I have so much respect for John the Baptist. It's an attitude that I want to be able to emulate. John says, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Jesus must continue to grow and go up the ladder. I, on the other hand, must climb down.

John is comfortable with diminishing. He chooses it. He welcomes it. John the Baptist teaches us to decrease.

These four statements are incredible. John teaches us to receive; to defer; to accept; and to decrease.

This is not what we are taught in our culture. These words are not the way to get what you want out of this life.

We are taught that you can't wait to receive anything. You have to go out there and take what you want. The early bird gets the worm. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. Make your own opportunities.

We would rather achieve than receive. What we have is only what we've earned. We are taught to take, not receive.

We are taught that you can't defer to anyone else. You need to figure out your identity. You can be all that you can be. You can create yourself. You can change and improve and craft your personality and your strengths. We are taught to be more, do more, and improve ourselves. In our world, my identity is who I can make myself into. But not for John. John defers to another. We are taught to insist on our way, not defer to others.

We are taught not to accept the way things are for us, but to push for something better. We're never supposed to be satisfied with our place in the story. There's the classic saying, "there are no small parts, only small actors." But we only have to say that because everyone wants the big parts. Everyone wants to play the lead. Most people want to be more and bigger and greater than we find ourselves. Our world wants a bigger role. We are taught to strive for something bigger, not accept what we have.

Finally, we are taught to increase. We want to drive farther, go faster, have more money, build bigger houses, and grow our investments. It's like that Verizon commercial where the guy asks a table full of kids, "What's better? Better or worse?" Of course, they all answer "better." Why

would anyone prefer decrease? How could worse ever be better? We are taught to increase, not decrease.

John the Baptist teaches us to receive, defer, accept, and decrease. Our world says to take, insist, strive, and increase. This is why he is more than just someone who tells us that Jesus is coming. He shows us Jesus in his own actions. He does what Jesus does. He imitates Jesus for us. So that when we see Jesus, we recognize him by his words along with his actions.

Think back to the situation that I asked you to remember. Some situation that you found yourself in similar to where John found himself. Think back to how you responded. Maybe you responded like this. Maybe you didn't. If you didn't, what would it have looked like to have responded this way? How might things have ended up differently?

John the Baptist teaches us to receive, defer, accept and decrease. That is why when everyone thinks of John the Baptist, they think of a duck. John the Baptist reminds us of a duck.

In between high school and college, I took a year off and traveled with a music ministry team. We did youth ministry by going into churches and putting on concerts for youth and families. We had a very specific way of understanding our philosophy of ministry.

Our goal was to draw attention to ourselves. We would come to a church, do our best to get the youth of the church all excited, and then leave the next day. I had long hair, we played loud music, and we were crazy. But all of it was intentional. We saw our role as drawing attention to ourselves. Getting everyone to look at us.

Then, at just the right moment, we would duck. And behind us would be Christ. Behind us would be God and his offer of life through Jesus Christ. We were flashy and loud and crazy so that people would pay attention to us. But then we would duck and they would see Christ. We got their attention and then explained that all of it was about Jesus, not us.

The problem is that it's easy to say that and forget to duck. It's easy to draw attention to yourself and find that you really like it. It's easy to discover that you kind of like being popular. And so we would constantly remind ourselves and each other: remember to duck.

This is why John the Baptist is just like a duck. This is what he does so well. At just the right time, he ducks. In the moment when he could have allowed his ego to get in the way and try to insert himself into the situation in new and more significant ways, he ducked. He knew to receive. To defer. To accept. And to decrease.

John the Baptist remembered to duck.

Reflection

That's where the story ends. John the Baptist is an incredible model of humility. But we are left with this question: How did he do it? What is his secret?

So just like last week, the author of the gospel steps in and adds some reflection after the story. His comments help to make sense of what we just saw happen and help us to think about how we might be able to emulate John the Baptist.

John 3:31-36:

³¹He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³²He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. ³³Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. ³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

I'll be the first to admit that John's reflections can often be a little confusing. He speaks in such grand language that it can often be tricky to figure out exactly what he's saying. I'll do my best to help us understand what I think is the main point of these verses.

John is trying to help his readers see that Jesus is worth stepping aside for. All of the language of this section is focused on how incredible Jesus is. He who comes from above is above all; He who comes from heaven is above all; His testimony is true; he is the one that God sent; he utters the words of God; The Father loves Him uniquely and has given everything to Him. Jesus is one whom we believe in. Jesus is the one who takes away the wrath of God. Jesus is the one who gives eternal life.

John was willing to step aside because Jesus is worth stepping aside for.

This is an important addition because otherwise we might get the impression that John the Baptist is advocating a "less is more" approach to life. We might think that the point is that God wants everything to decrease. Our world says increasing is good. God says decreasing is good.

But that isn't why John the Baptist stepped aside. He stepped aside for Jesus because Jesus is worth stepping aside for. Jesus is unique. Jesus is supreme.

This helps us because it helps us orient ourselves properly to God. John the Baptist had the benefit of stepping aside for Jesus himself. Even though it might have been difficult, it's kind of a no brainer. But most of the time, we don't face that situation. Most of the time it's someone else or another circumstance that we have to step aside for. That makes it harder.

But it helps to realize that we aren't stepping aside for them. We don't defer to them because they ask us to. We defer to them because God has asked us to and we defer to Him. They aren't supreme. Christ is. It's always about Jesus.

Our choices that seem to be about other people are really about Christ. We are not called to be downwardly mobile in general. We are called to recognize Christ as supreme. Submitting to Christ at times means submitting to other people.

I asked you earlier to think about a situation that you've faced that is similar to John the Baptist's situation. Now I'd like to invite you to think of a current situation in your life. Your family? Your job? Your classmates? Your friends?

What would it look like to step aside for Christ? How would putting Christ first translate into some of those relationships? Could God be asking you to receive? To defer? To accept? To decrease? How does stepping aside for Christ play out in your life?

Conclusion

With this, we have come to the end of the first part of John's gospel. We've seen a grand theological introduction of Jesus. We've seen Jesus introduced by John the Baptist. We've seen Jesus gather his followers. We've seen him turn water into wine. We've seen him overturn the tables in the temple. We've seen him talk about being born again. And now we see Jesus receive one final endorsement.

It looked as if things might get ugly. It started out as a petty competition. What could easily have turned into jealousy and hurt feelings. But John refuses to play that game. He doesn't lose to Jesus because he isn't competing. He understands his calling and his role and his responsibility. He knew when to attract attention. He knew when to duck. He models being downwardly mobile.

What's actually happening is that John the Baptist prepares us for Jesus in more ways than one. John defers to Jesus. But as the story continues, we realize that John is modeling the same thing that Jesus is doing. Jesus is the original founder of the downwardly mobile lifestyle. He came down. He descended. He laid down his life.

If anyone was ever willing to decrease for the sake of someone else, it was Jesus.

But we have been saying that Jesus is the source of life. That following him leads to something better, not something worse. And that is the mystery of the gospel. We will watch the source of life decrease to the point of death. Life itself will die. But it will give birth to new life. The great mystery of Christ that we will discover in this gospel is that by following Jesus on his downwardly mobile path, we will rise up to new life.

Do you want to live? Do you want more than what you have? Greed is one option. You could fight for it. You could claw your way to the top. You could do everything in your power to get what you want.

But John the Baptist shows us a different way. It's the way that Jesus will be showing us throughout the rest of this gospel. The path to life is about receiving, not taking. It's about deferring, not insisting. It's about accepting, not striving. It's about decrease, not increase.

The path to life is a downward journey. It actually goes through death. But on the other side is something better than we could ever have done on our own. On the other side is real life. Eternal life.

When we follow John the Baptist and Jesus and start out downwardly mobile, we end up in glory.

NOTES

¹Gordon Gekko, "Preaching the Gospel of Greed." (NPR. Retrieved 2010-09-26).