

“The Quest to Be Number One”
John 3:22-30; Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Eighty-two thousand people crammed the Sugar Bowl on January 1, 1951 to watch the number one Oklahoma Sooners play the number seven Kentucky Wildcats. Oklahoma was 10-0, with a thirty-one game winning streak. Coached by the legendary Bud Wilkinson, their lofty tradition was a strong favorite against the upstart Wildcats. Kentucky was 10-1, having garnered its first Southeastern Conference title, led by a young coach by the name of Paul “Bear” Bryant. Behind quarterback Babe Parilli and a ferocious defense Kentucky upset the Sooners 13-7.

Few people would today think of Kentucky as a football school, or remember that Bear Bryant spent eight highly successful seasons with the Wildcats. Despite these eight consecutive winning seasons and four bowl games, the Bear moved on to Texas A&M in 1953, and then eventually Alabama. Through the decades there has been much speculation as to why Bryant left a place where he enjoyed huge fan support, significant resources, and winning teams. The apocryphal reason comes from a story Bryant himself used to repeat at speaking engagements to soften up the crowd.

The story was that at a Kentucky sports banquet the University gave its basketball coach, Adolph Rupp, a brand new Cadillac and then turned to Bear Bryant and awarded him a gold cigarette lighter. Of course, the story wasn’t true, but there was truth in it.

The often perceived conflict between Rupp and Bryant was also not true. They supported each other’s programs and remained friends for the rest of their lives. In fact, Bryant tells a wonderful story about how much he appreciated Coach Rupp after Bryant had gone to Texas A&M and lost nine games in his first year. He and Rupp were doing a clinic together in Utah and during a press conference Rupp defended Bryant telling the media, “You think he’s down a little bit now, but I’ll tell you, he will win. He will win. And you gentlemen in Texas who are playing him, he will run you right out of the business. Five, ten years from now, he will be the top man, make no mistake about it, and don’t forget Uncle Adolph told you.”

When asked in a 1966 Sports Illustrated article about his time at Kentucky, Bryant replied, “Well, we won at Kentucky, and I don’t think I’d have ever left if I hadn’t gotten pigheaded. It was probably the most stupid thing I ever did. I could have had just about anything I wanted, and Mary Harman (his wife) loved it.”

Then in the same article the Bear was asked why he then eventually left Kentucky. Bryant moved on in 1953. Kentucky had won the NCAA basketball championship in 1948, ’49, and ’52. Bryant replied, “I guess, to be perfectly honest about it, the crux of the matter, me and Coach Rupp. If Rupp had retired as basketball coach when they said he was going to I’d probably still be at Kentucky.

The trouble was we were too much alike, and he wanted basketball No. 1 and I wanted football No. 1. In an environment like that one or the other has to go.”

John’s disciples came to him and said, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John replied, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” John knew he and Jesus could not both be number one.

Our scripture begins by telling us that Jesus and his disciples were traveling around the countryside baptizing people. John the Baptist was also baptizing individuals in another area where there was abundant water. John’s disciples, remember John the Baptist had his own following, are approached by a Jew with a question or comment about purification. Purification concerned Jewish rites to determine one’s readiness for worship, sacrifice, or other religious activities.

Now, there is a little disconnect here because the next sentence moves to a comment about Jesus. So, for instance, it may be this person was asking the difference in the manner of purification between the baptism of Jesus’ disciples and John’s. We just don’t know.

But whatever prompts it, John’s disciples immediately express their concern about Jesus’ ministry. “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” Otherwise, the guy whom you introduced to everyone through baptism is now doing exactly what you are doing, and he’s getting all the business!

John replies by explaining to his disciples that if people are going over to Jesus, it is because God has led them that way. In fact, he reminds them that he said, “I am not the Messiah.” Rather, John compares himself to the friend of the bridegroom, what we would call the best man, who makes all the preparations so that the groom may take his rightful place beside the bride. John then concludes with his last, and most instructive, recorded statement, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

The Sunday school teacher asked her eight eager ten-year-olds if they would give \$1 million to missionaries.

“Yes!” they all screamed.

“Would you give \$1,000?” she asked.

Again, the kids shouted, “Yes!”

“How about \$100?”

“Oh, yes, we would!” they all agreed.

“Would you give just a dollar to the missionaries?” she asked.

All the children exclaimed, “Yes!” just as before — except Johnnie.

“Johnnie,” the teacher said, as she noticed the boy clutching his pocket.

“Why didn’t you say yes this time?”

“Well,” he stammered, “I have a dollar.”

John the Baptist’s choice to give priority to Jesus was not just an idea, but a tangible giving of what was his to Jesus.

In our minds, most of us carry a chronology of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus, and then immediately being arrested and beheaded by Herod. Yet, this passage reminds us that the ministries of John and Jesus ran concurrently for a period. In fact, even after John the Baptist's death, there are passages where scholars believe John's disciples are creating some turmoil for Jesus. And here, in our scripture lesson, we have a vivid picture of this conflict.

Before Jesus' arrival, John is the most visible and popular religious figure in Israel, likely even exceeding the High Priest in Jerusalem. We even have secular sources, writings outside the Bible, that mention John the Baptist. Plus, the very fact that King Herod so fears him that he has him arrested and beheaded speaks to how popular and powerful John the Baptist had become.

All of this points to the significance of John's ministry. He must have been drawing huge crowds. People were coming out to hear him, seeking out his wisdom and teaching, asking for his advice. He was the Billy Graham of first century Israel.

But then, like a spigot being shut off, people begin to go hear Jesus instead of John. We don't really know how quickly or suddenly his crowds began to recede, but this passage tells us that recede they did, so much that his disciples are concerned. John the Baptist was human, like you and me. This had to be a blow to his ego, his sense of self worth, his confidence in his preaching, his assurance that God was with him.

So, how does John respond to this seeming slap in the face, the ascendance of the one he baptized? "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.'" Otherwise, "Guys, this isn't a competition. We're all on the same side." John's and Jesus' ministries were not competitive, but complementary. The goal was not for one of them to win, but for God's will to be done. And for that to occur, someone had to step aside. As John put it, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

This is an important lesson for us as a society, a church, and as individuals. For instance, I'd like to get all the politicians and cable talk show hosts in a room and remind them that health care is not a competition. The goal is not to produce political winners or losers, but do what is best for the country.

Likewise, in American churches, the goal is not to get more members than the church down the street, but to have more people experience and live the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

And within each of our lives, how do I make my decisions, by what I think gets me ahead, or choosing as Jesus would choose? When I look at how I treat others, spend my money, do business, give, love and forgive, is Jesus increasing while I decrease, or because of my desire to be number one, is Jesus decreasing because my ego is increasing?

A little boy asked his mother what was the highest number she had ever counted to. She said she didn't know, but asked him what was the highest number to which he had counted. Immediately he replied, "5,372."

“Oh,” she said, “Why did you stop there?”

He responded, “Church was over.”

Do I see my faith as a method to improve myself or a way to serve Jesus?

John replied, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice.”

John’s analogy of himself as the friend of the bridegroom would have been one all his listeners readily grasped. Though the closest equivalent we have is the best man at a wedding, in first century Palestine, the friend of the bridegroom possessed far more wide ranging responsibilities. In a Jewish wedding, the friend of the bridegroom acted as a liaison between the bride and groom. In fact, he arranged the wedding. He delivered the invitations and presided at the wedding feast. Also, it was his duty to guard the bridal chamber until the groom arrived so that no false bridegroom could enter.

So, as you can see, the friend of the bridegroom did all the work. Yet, when it came time for the bridegroom to take his place beside the bride, the friend would step aside and relinquish that position to the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom brought the bride and groom together, and then faded from the picture. John the Baptist said, I am the friend of the bridegroom and it is my joy to see Jesus take his rightful place as God’s Messiah.

Each one of us possesses different gifts, different callings. Some of us cook, others clean, some prepare communion, some teach, some work with “It’s Elementary!”, some serve as Stephen Ministers, some go to the Dominican Republic, some watch over the church’s finances, some direct weddings, some pray, some sing, etc., etc., etc.

What is important is that each of us understands that we possess a gift, a calling, every single one of us, and that gift was given to glorify God. John the Baptist obviously possessed gifts of charisma, preaching, drawing people to himself. But he used them to point to Jesus, and not himself. To whom, are your gifts pointing?

One day a certain old, rich man of a miserable disposition visited a rabbi, who took the rich man by the hand and led him to a window. “Look out there,” he said. The rich man looked into the street. “What do you see?” asked the rabbi.

“I see men, women and children, God’s creation,” answered the rich man.

Again the rabbi took him by the hand and this time led him to a mirror. “Now what do you see?”

“Now I see myself,” the rich man replied.

Then the rabbi said, “Behold, in the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver. No sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others but see only yourself.”

When you and I examine how we are using our gifts, are we constructing windows or mirrors?

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This morning, during the last hymn, we will come forward to place our financial commitment cards on the communion table, dedicating them to God’s work. The amount each of us commits to God’s work is a strong indication of who is number one in our lives, whether Jesus is increasing or decreasing. Remember, Jesus talked more about money than any other subject. John the Baptist’s temptation remains ours, will my life be about me or God? Will Christ increase while I decrease? Or, am I fighting to keep myself number one in my decisions and actions?

This morning, let each of us ask ourselves, as I look at my gifts, my calling, how I live, work, give, manage my day to day existence, what and who is number one in my life?

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