

“My Uncle, John the Baptist”

Sermon based on Isaiah 40:1-8, Luke 3:1-22, Rev. 14:7

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I'll bet you didn't know that my uncle was John the Baptist. Well, he was. It's just that he was a different John the Baptist from the one Jesus knew. You see, I had an uncle named John who was a Baptist. But Uncle John was not just a Baptist; I mean, he exemplified everything negative we Methodists thought about the Baptists: he was self-righteous, dogmatic, ready to point the finger at the sins of others, quite certain that he knew the Bible better than other people and that his interpretation of it was the only correct one, and that the Baptist Church was therefore the only true, Bible-believing church. So, behind his back, some of the rest of us in the family used to call him “John the Baptist,” though he never heard us call him that, which is a good thing, because this was actually our way of making fun of him.

In part this sermon is my way of trying to come to terms with the impact of my uncle in my life. And, in part, it is also an apology to him of sorts. I think I understand him a lot better now than I did when as a child and a teen-ager. At any rate, even though I will talk about what I thought back then and still think today were his faults, I speak of him this morning with complete love and compassion for him since I now realize he had a very hard life and that his suffering contributed to some of those sides of his personality that were difficult for the rest of us to bear.

Still, this sermon isn't really about my John the Baptist; it's about Jesus' John the Baptist. But when I asked myself, “How would I preach a sermon about John the Baptist?” who looms so large in the scriptures for the Advent season, the memory of my own uncle came back vividly into my mind. And then I realized that the two Johns had a lot in common. So, let me explain

what I see as the similarities, so that my experience of my uncle may shed some light upon what the New Testament says about the John the Baptist who played such an influential role in the life of Jesus.

The original John the Baptist was an oddball. He was a solitary, lonely figure who lived in the Judean desert near the Jordan River. He's what we would call a "hermit." He was also an ascetic, that is, he didn't eat ordinary food, but rather dined on locusts and wild honey and wore an outfit made of camel's hair with a leather belt (Mark 1:6). He saw himself as a prophet along the lines set forth by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years earlier: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isa. 40:3, paraphrased in Luke 3:4). John called upon his fellow Jews to repent of their sins before the coming of the messiah so that they could be a part of the remnant of Israel that the messiah would recognize as the true Israel when he arrived. John was especially critical of the priests who ran the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. He believed that the priesthood and the Temple were corrupt and, consequently, they had lost their legitimacy as official religious institutions for the Jewish people. As a result, John didn't acknowledge their authority anymore, and he called upon his fellow Jews not to place their trust in them. Instead, he believed that his own baptism by immersion in the River Jordan signified who was a true Jew versus those who merely appeared to be Jews by virtue of having been born Jewish. Yet, when those Jews who wanted to be true Jews came to him for baptism, John didn't say to them: "Welcome; I'm so glad to see you." Rather, he chastised them and called them a bunch of snakes: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7). He preached a message of hellfire and damnation: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:9). He warned them not to consider

themselves saved just because they were Jews: “do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8). John’s preaching was a harangue, in which he censured, criticized, attacked, lambasted, berated, upbraided, and castigated the people. Who would like such a guy?

My uncle John was a Baptist because his father, my grandfather, had become a Baptist after immigrating to this country from Romania. My grandfather had been converted by a fundamentalist Baptist preacher who convinced him that only the Baptist Church had the correct interpretation of the Bible and that, by contrast, the Romanian Orthodox Church, of which my grandparents had been members since their birth, was actually the church of Satan. As a result, my grandfather left the Romanian Church in St. Paul, Minnesota and took his family to Temple Baptist Church which was located in a former movie theatre in a run-down section of town. I remember going there as a boy and being struck by the fact that, instead of sitting in pews, the church members sat in movie-theatre seats. Across the front entrance was a big sign that read: “Heaven or Hell? Where Will You Spend Eternity?” When Uncle John and his family visited us in California and attended our United Methodist Church, we’d hear a barrage of criticisms of our church. Some of the criticisms were that we had printed prayers in the order of service; not only did Temple Baptist Church have no printed order of service, but it was believed by these Baptists that the only authentic prayers were those that were completely spontaneous. Hence, written prayers weren’t real prayers. Moreover, my uncle objected to the use of the term “reverend” as a title for our minister. As he told us, his pastor rejected the title for himself with the explanation, “There’s nothing ‘reverend’ about me.” But the most important criticism of our church was that we practiced infant baptism, which was completely unbiblical in their eyes. This was the sin that disqualified our church from being a true Christian, Bible-believing church. For my uncle, only

those who had made a conscious decision to accept Jesus as their personal lord and savior could be baptized, which meant that infants and small children should never be baptized because they weren't capable of making such a decision yet. Moreover, it wasn't sufficient merely to sprinkle a few drops of water on someone's head. You had to be completely immersed in the baptismal pool. Not surprisingly, therefore, my uncle's church had what looked to me like a little swimming pool right up front by the pulpit.

When I was a child, I found these religious controversies in my extended family confusing and fascinating at the same time. Only much later was I able to understand what they were all about. Nonetheless, even as a boy, I could feel there was a significant difference between being in the Baptist Church and being in my Methodist Church. I remember how afraid I felt in my uncle's church, though I was never afraid in my own church. We didn't talk about going to hell in my church, and for as long as I could remember, being in my church always conveyed to me a deeply comforting sense of assurance that I was loved by God. One Sunday night after visiting my uncle's church I remember praying fervently that God wouldn't send me to hell. But nothing in my own church would ever have led me to say that prayer.

I hope you can see the parallels between these two John the Baptists. My uncle didn't think we were true Christians. That other John the Baptist didn't think most of his fellow Jews were true Jews. For both of them, the sign of being a real Christian or a real Jew was baptism by immersion that reflected one's conscious decision to repent of one's sins. For the first John the Baptist, his fellow Jews needed to repent because the messiah was about to come. For my uncle John the Baptist, we needed to repent of our sins because the messiah had already come. For both of them, fear of hell and the threat of damnation loomed large in their preaching.

As I grew up and became an adult, I realized that in virtually every respect I disagreed with my uncle theologically. He was a fundamentalist. I was not. I hadn't been raised in a fundamentalist church, but precisely for that reason I couldn't quote as many verses from the Bible off the top of my tongue as he and my cousins could. That had made me wonder if perhaps they were right about what the Bible teaches, which would also have meant that they were right about my church: it wasn't really a true Christian church grounded in the Bible.

As an adult I also realized that my uncle's theology was tied to his politics in a way I would also have to reject. I mention politics here, as well as theology, because in 1968 my uncle voted for George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, who ran as an independent against both Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey. I remember how my uncle called my father on the phone before the election in order to try to get him to vote for Wallace, but my father had already made up his mind to vote for Nixon. In 1968 I was only 11 years old. This was the year Martin Luther King had been assassinated, but I was too young to understand either what King stood for or what Wallace stood for. It was only years later that I was able to grasp that my uncle, who had prided himself on being such a stellar Christian, had voted for a defender of segregation. I was repulsed to learn what his vote represented, especially as it was at this same time that our minister at the Methodist Church in Glendora had been preaching civil rights from the pulpit (I only later learned this fact too, since I was too young to understand any of this at the time.) Later, however, in my teenage years, I do remember that it was at our Methodist Church that I learned about the civil rights struggle and I learned that it was wrong to treat "negroes" with "prejudice" (which were the words we used then for "blacks" and "racism"). So, my own church and my uncle's church couldn't have been more different from one another.

When I moved to Minnesota to teach at a seminary there, I got to spend a lot more time with my uncle than ever before. Now he was a very old man, and he had softened a lot. I don't think he had changed his mind about anything, but I sensed an affection from him that I hadn't felt as a boy. He now seemed less like a self-righteous hellfire-and-damnation preacher than a lonely person who needed company and love from others. I asked him a lot of questions about his own life and that of his brother, my father, since by then my father had long been dead and I was never able to ask my father the kinds of questions that only a grown-up son would think of asking his father. It was in this context of a new relationship with my uncle John that I recalled and began to appreciate some of what my father had told me about his older brother. My dad loved his brother John and looked up to him. When my dad was an infantryman in WWII, his brother was an officer in the army and both were stationed in Europe. A few months before my father was taken prisoner in the Battle of the Bulge in December of 1944, my uncle located where my father was stationed and whisked him away from his camp for a picnic one day. At the end of their afternoon together, my uncle gave my father his heavy coat which only officers had access to; when my father was captured by the German army and sent to a prison camp for the rest of the war, that coat, my father later said, saved him from freezing to death. He always attributed his survival in that camp to the coat that he got from his brother John.

By this time in my life, when I had the most opportunity for interaction with my uncle John, I assiduously avoided talking with him about the difficult issues of politics and theology. I didn't need to do that since, after years of study and reflection, I now had the courage of my own convictions and didn't need his external validation. Besides, by then, when I was in my thirties, I was really more interested in understanding him than in having him understand me. I realized I had had opportunities for education that he never had access to and that I had had the blessing of

a completely different kind of experience of Christian nurture growing up in a completely different kind of church than he had had. Also, I learned that I had never suffered as he and my father had suffered. They both grew up during the Depression, whereas I grew up in a situation of relative affluence by comparison. They both had to serve as soldiers in wartime, which I never had to experience myself. I also learned from other relatives that, even though my uncle had not been a prisoner of war as my dad had been, my uncle did suffer a severe nervous breakdown after the war and had to be hospitalized. This was one of those shameful family secrets that I heard about on in a hushed whisper. But today he would have been diagnosed as having PTSD: "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." Finally, toward of his life, my uncle apologized to the other members of our family for the ways he had been overbearing and arrogant, self-righteous and unloving toward them. At the end of his life, then, even though my uncle was still a fundamentalist and probably still had never really come to terms with his own complicity with racism in this country, he had become a truly humble and gentle man, asking forgiveness from those he had hurt and wanting their love, because he loved us. When he died, he was a genuine Christian, because he knew that he too was a sinner in a much deeper sense than he had ever before realized, and I don't think he would still have been so inclined to cast the first stone at others for being sinners as he had previously been so quick to do in his earlier days.

There's no doubt that both my uncle and the original John the Baptist were men of strong faith and conviction. Like my uncle, that other John the Baptist also offended people. In fact, he ended up offending not only the priests at the Jerusalem Temple but even Herod who had John's head cut off. But before John's execution, many Jews took his message of repentance to heart and one of these Jews was Jesus. The first thing we learn about Jesus' adult life is that he was baptized by John in the River Jordan. This means that Jesus must have understood himself as a

disciple or follower of John, at least initially. Jesus eventually struck out on a path all his own, conducting a ministry of preaching, healing, and exorcism in the villages of Galilee. Like John, Jesus was also critical of the Temple; recall that, right before his own execution, Jesus marched into Jerusalem with his rag-tag band of followers and staged a demonstration in the Temple to protest its corruption. Like John, his preaching called upon individuals to take seriously their own relationship with God and this preaching often brought him into conflict with other Jewish teachers such as Pharisees and Sadducees. But unlike John, Jesus healed the sick and cast demons out of the possessed. He realized that some of those people John was so inclined to judge stood in need of healing. Moreover, he seemed to have a special liking for precisely those people John condemned as “sinners.” We know from the criticisms leveled against him by his opponents that Jesus hung out with the religiously and morally unacceptable people of his day. Moreover, he enjoyed their company at dinner parties where he liked to eat and drink. John, you will remember, was an ascetic who neither ate bread nor drank wine, whereas Jesus was accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:33-34). This very striking difference between the conduct of John and the conduct of Jesus has raised lots of questions on the part of biblical scholars as to just how Jesus understood his relationship to John. On the one hand, Jesus praised John and submitted himself to the authority of John’s baptism; on the other hand, Jesus’ whole approach to this same group of sinners whom John called “vipers” was so utterly different. Jesus apparently didn’t try to scare them by preaching about hellfire and damnation. He seems, rather, to have had an uncanny ability to convey that he cared about them, which then gave them a sense of their worth in God’s eyes.

So, let’s get back to my uncle, John the Baptist. Maybe the difference between my uncle and me is similar to that between Jesus and his John the Baptist. I’m clearly not a hellfire-and-

damnation preacher, and I like to hang out with all sorts of people, even with those whom some church people might denounce as “sinners.” And I too have been known to enjoy and sometimes even to over-indulge in good food and wine at dinner parties, whether dining with the right sort of people or the wrong sort of people. And yet, while I have been very critical of my uncle both theologically and politically, I have had to come to terms with him in my life, just as Jesus had to come to terms with the John the Baptist in his own life. So, let me conclude by saying some words about why we all need a John the Baptist in our lives, even if it’s also true that every John the Baptist needs a Jesus in his life.

First of all, let me clarify that I am not condemning or criticizing all Baptists, just as I am not praising all Methodists. There are many kinds of Baptists just as there are many kinds of Methodists. Jimmy Carter is a Baptist, but he rejected the Southern Baptist Convention in which he was raised when it was taken over by fundamentalists. And he is most certainly not a racist. Our United Methodist denomination is now threatened with takeover by fundamentalists. And our Methodist history is also marred by racism and participation in slavery and segregation.

But I do think that John the Baptist and Jesus represent two types of preaching the gospel, both of which need to be heard in combination with one another, even if they also stand in some tension with one another. Sometimes good preaching needs to call people to repent of their sins while at other times good preaching needs to comfort people who are suffering. The gospel is thus a double-edged sword (Heb. 4:12): it serves to comfort the afflicted but also to afflict the comfortable. John the Baptist was a great preacher who afflicted the comfortable, those who thought they didn’t need to repent of sins because of their distinguished Jewish lineage: “We have Abraham as our father” (Luke 3:8). By contrast, Jesus was really good at preaching comfort to the afflicted, even to those who were afflicted because of what the official religious

leaders were teaching or doing. Good preaching and good ministry have to do both: we have to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, even if this is a difficult balancing act at times. For example, in our desire to comfort, we may forget that people also need to be challenged with a sharp word; in such cases, our preaching becomes nothing more than a superficial “feel good” religion lacking in depth and profundity. Yet, in our zeal to afflict the comfortable, we may become overweening, overbearing, self-righteous, cocky, disdainful, patronizing, and smug.

Like John the Baptist, I too want to call people to make a decision about God and their salvation. Like John the Baptist, I believe the church has to call people to account for their lives before God. Like John the Baptist, we have to dare to expose superficial understandings of Christianity that leave people with delusions about their own righteousness. But we have to do this ministry of John the Baptist all the while recognizing that those to whom we address our prophetic preaching are also broken sinners who need the comfort offered by the ministry of Jesus. Finally, as we follow in the steps of John the Baptist, let us never forget that we too are broken sinners who in our own ways, however subtle, need to have our own illusions shattered, so that we will always be ready to throw ourselves upon the mercy of God embodied in Jesus. Let us judge others and judge ourselves honestly and forthrightly, but always with a generous dose of mercy. Like my uncle John the Baptist, let us preach our gospel with conviction even if it makes us unpopular, but let us also be ready to forgive and to ask for the forgiveness of others.