**3John 3:26-32a,36** April 5, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Palm Sunday

*John 3:26 [John the Baptist’s disciples] came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.” 27To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. 28You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ 29The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. 30He must become greater; I must become less.*

*31“The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32He testifies to what he has seen and heard… 36Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The Matchmaker**

**A. Temptations**

It happens to everyone some time. For a long time it was just the two of you, or maybe there were three or four of you, but it was especially the two of you: best friends. Then one day your best friend was suddenly making other friends, people whom you had hardly said a word to in years of rubbing shoulders. Now you and your best friend weren’t hanging around much at lunch or talking like you used to. I don’t need to go through all the details. You don’t have to pick a scab to know it hurts. We get really wrapped up in personal relationships—which is okay. That’s how God made us!

It happened in Moses’ time. Moses, remember that leader of God’s people, the Israelites? He was the leader of this ragtag bunch who had been slaves all their lives. Well, now they had freedom. But you have to grow into freedom. Too much freedom too quickly and you end up with, well, Israelites. Their parents (who were slaves too) never taught them that with freedom comes responsibility. That’s just the way it is. You can’t say, “I’ll take a slice of freedom, hold the responsibility.” It doesn’t work that way. Have some friends over, you’ll have to clean up. Get a car, pay for insurance. If the governor says, “We’re going to give you a bit more freedom than the other states around us and not force you to stay at home,” then you’d better be responsible with your freedom. Don’t go coughing on people. Stay six feet apart in the checkout aisle. Because if you aren’t responsible, you are going to lose some of your freedom. Well, Moses was leading people who just didn’t understand that, so he summoned all 70 of Israel’s leaders. But two of those 70, Eldad and Medad, (maybe they were too embarrassed about their names) Eldad and Medad didn’t make roll call. Well, the Spirit of the Lord came down on Moses and the rest of the 70 and they started prophesying. Okay. And then the report came in that Eldad and Medad back in their tents were prophesying too. Moses’ right hand man, Joshua, said, *“Moses, my lord, stop them!”* Do you hear his jealousy for his master? “You can’t let them prophesy! They didn’t even show up for the big meeting. If they get away with this nobody’s going to show up for the big meetings!” Moses wasn’t concerned. But for Joshua it was a big deal. When all you have is your boss’s prestige, you get protective of your boss’s prestige. If he loses it, you’re not side kick to a big man, you’re side kick to a nobody. *“Moses, stop them.”* (Num. 21)

Happened in Jesus’ time too. One of his disciples named John—the apostle not the Baptist—said to Jesus one fine afternoon, *“Teacher, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “*Hey, *WE* are your disciples Jesus. We’ve stuck with you through thick and thin. You chew us out—and I guess we deserve it sometimes—but you chew us out and we listen. This fly-by-nighter who only heard that one sermon of yours over by Bethsaida… he just shouldn’t be doing this!” Jesus just said, *“‘Do not stop him…* *Whoever is not against us is for us.”* (Mark 9).

There are more in the Bible. But it’s not just the Bible. Like the time you were a kid with your dad driving down the road, and someone honked and gestured and said something low-down and ugly to your dad, not taking into account that his kid was in the car, and you just wanted your dad to deck him, and if he didn’t, you’d at least kick him in the shins. Dad just said, “Well, they probably had a bad day,” and you thought, “Come on, dad. Show ’em!” That’s not bad to defend your parents honor. But to be honest, part of it was that it felt like it made you a little smaller too.

John’s disciples—this is John the Baptist, now, not John the apostle. (By the way, if you want proof that the Bible is the real deal and not something some guys cooked up in a back room, this is it. After all, what author puts two guys with the same name in the same story. And how about the three Marys at the cross!) Anyway, John the Baptist’s disciples thought they saw their teacher disrespected. John had had the nation’s attention—the entire nation—and they shared in it. Their share cost them. They lived in the desert, lived off the land, dressed funny. All that trouble, but there was the prestige of being John’s students.

Now John was losing market share to Jesus, and John’s disciples were losing market share. It feels grand to sit on the stage behind the preacher when there are ten thousand people out there. Not so grand when there are eight people in folding chairs.

***“[John the Baptist’s disciples] came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”***

Do you see what had happened to them? They said, ***“that man you testified about.”*** They knew that Jesus was the one John had prophesied. They knew it! They admitted it! But they couldn’t accept it. Their teacher, John the Baptist who preached those fiery words of repentance and lived the tough life was being eclipsed. As John was being eclipsed, his followers were fading lesser lights. Jesus—good guy, good teacher—but John still held a magnetic appeal.

It can happen. Some people like Christianity better than they like Christ. Some like their preacher better than they like the one he preaches about. People can forget how much of themselves they have wrapped up in their religion. They don’t realize that a little bit of what they are worshiping is of their making, not God’s. Can our worship become so wrapped up in a way of worship (whether traditional or contemporary) that we forget why or whom we worship? Is it more emotional than spiritual? (By the way, those aren’t the same thing.) Can our concern for right teaching lead us to forget the reason for right teaching? Can our concern for right living lead us to be impatient with the weak and the learning? Do we so love the crowd at church family that we forget why we gather at church? The list could go on.

John’s disciples had gotten more concerned about John than Jesus. And that had bled back into actually even being more concerned about their own status than Jesus.

They weren’t heathens, not yet. You don’t have to be a heathen to fall into sin. Christians do it all the time. John the Baptist wasn’t talking to heathens, and he didn’t talk like he was talking to heathens. He was talking to believers; misdirected believers, yes; sinning believers, yes; but still believers. They, and we, when we forget what is really important about our faith, we need the bitter medicine of repentance. We must go to our heavenly Father and beg his forgiveness. We have begun to put up altars to false gods. The tricky things about these false gods is that they do resemble God: a church, loving people, a pastor, a preacher, a crucial teaching, whatever. Keep them in the right place, below Jesus.

How good it is to have our Savior! How badly we need him to clean up all the bits of idolatry that we let into our lives! What a beautiful Savior we have! He paid for it all. He took it all to the cross. He satisfied the demands that God’s law laid up against us. He paid for our guilt.

**B. Joy**

Now someone might ask what all this has to do with Palm Sunday. Surely, to this point, not much. But John’s response to his disciples had everything to do with Palm Sunday.

Think about what was happening on Palm Sunday? “Well, the crowds praised Jesus as the prophesied Messiah.” Yes. But something deeper was happening.

Some might say the birth of a child is the happiest day of life. And if you say that, I won’t say you’re wrong. But with a child comes a huge responsibility, and the mother feels it from the first necessity of that newborn to nurse. But a wedding, somehow, at least to me, a wedding is undiluted joy. Fairy tales don’t find their happy ending at a birth. Joy is complete when the prince and princess are wed, “…and they lived happily ever after.”

That’s what Palm Sunday was about: the joy of Christ finding his people. John’s prophetic eyes could see it 18 months before it happened. He could see it happening when he looked at the eight people in the folding chairs, and everyone else was flocking to Jesus. John described it this way, in a parable of sorts, ***“The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.”*** What’s that? Real quick: the bride is God’s people, the groom is Jesus, and the friend or best man is John. Let me read it again. **[*Read again.*]**

As John’s popularity became less, he became happier. He was the best man, so full of joy that his dear friend Jesus had found his believers. John’s disciples had been urging the best man to run off with the bride. No! What true friend could do such a thing! As he watches Christ court his people, John says, ***“my joy is now complete.”***

On Palm Sunday, we can imagine ourselves shoulder to shoulder in the sunshine, the swirls of dust raised by thousands of feet. We can imagine shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” We can imagine that euphoria, the heart jumping out of your chest, that you can only feel when you and ten thousand people are cheering for the same thing. That’s the joy of Palm Sunday. However, maybe with this reading, it is good for us to imagine standing Palm Sunday standing on a nearby hillside with John. Watch the people cheering. Look at Jesus beaming. We can look at the picture and smile ear to ear, not with our own joy, but the joy of matchmakers whose best friend has found her or his true friend for life.

As Christ’s people, we feel that joy when visitors worship with us for the first time. We feel that joy when we welcome new members to our church. We feel that joy when people who haven’t been here in a while show up again.

And here, if you want haven’t been to church in a while, I want to tell you something. Many people feel ashamed about their absence from God’s house. I’m not going to say they are wrong to feel that way, but that’s between them and God. But they also may feel that church members are going to look down their noses at them, give them a cold, arm’s length handshake. Oh, how you misunderstand God’s people! (And if that is what you do when people have been absent a long time, shame on you!) When you who have not been here come back, do you know what we feel? We feel joy. We feel the joy of John the Baptist, a joy that almost makes us jump out of our socks. We feel the joy that any Christian feels watching the Palm Sunday procession from a distance, ***“The friend who attends the bridegroom… is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.”***”

If you have not been in God’s house in quite a while, when this is all over, come back. Come and worship your Savior, and we are going to rejoice, just like the best man and maid of honor rejoice on a day not their own. Amen.