

A Sermon Upon the Retirement of Joseph D. Small
Charles Wiley
Presbyterian Center Chapel
December 16, 2010

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.”’

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. 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.’

One of the most shaping events of my life was being introduced to the theology of Karl Barth in the fall of 1981 at Davidson College, through Sandy McKelway and Barth’s short book, *Dogmatics in Outline*. As a kid who’d grown up in the Pilgrim Holiness Church, Barth’s theology was threatening, challenging, and beautiful. Barth’s remarkable theological vision founded in his unrelenting focus on the Jesus Christ as the Word of God has become enormously important to me and many, many others. I found his theology to be academically challenging, theologically helpful, and spiritually nourishing.

So, it was a particular joy last February to be standing, with Joe, in the Karl Barth archives in Basel, Switzerland. The archives are located in Barth's last house (Joe swears it is a freestanding house—I'm pretty sure it is a townhouse on the end of the building. Oddly enough, we both think we're right). And in a house where a great man produced many words, my memory is filled with images and smells.

As we walked up the steps we were greeted by the portraits of theologians of the past that Barth considered himself to be in conversation with—some I recognized, some were too obscure even for those of us who've wasted perfectly good lives reading obscure European theologians.

When I arrived in his study, my senses were drawn immediately to three different stimuli. First was the smell. It has been over 40 years since his death, but his books still give off the smell of Barth's pipe tobacco. It smelled, like one of my professors used to say, like "theology."

The second thing that grabbed my senses were the two portraits that hang on either side of the study: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Mozart was Barth's theological teacher by the way of music. Schleiermacher was the theologian who was both most influential on Barth, and the one with whom Barth disagreed most often.

But the most striking image in the room hangs right over Barth's desk: the Isenheim Altarpiece, the depiction of the crucifixion painted by Matthias Grünewald just before the Reformation in Alsace. It is gruesomely beautiful picture of Jesus' death on the cross and those who surround him. This altarpiece functioned in an iconic way for Barth, as Jesus Christ, God's true Word in human flesh, looked over and shaped his entire theological project.

What is most familiar to the people who read Barth is his description of the odd character just to the right of the cross, the figure who appears on the front of today's worship bulletin, John the Baptist. Barth writes: "[O]ne might recall John the Baptist in Grünewald's Crucifixion, especially his prodigious index finger. Could anyone point away from himself more impressively and completely? And could anyone point more impressively and realistically than here to what is indicated?" [CD: I.i, p. 112]

The John the Baptist that we encounter in Matthew 3 was, for Barth, more than the somewhat bizarre character who introduces the ministry of Christ in the Gospels. Grünewald depicts John, long-dead by the time of the crucifixion, exercising his calling, his vocation, at the foot of the cross by pointing toward the one "who was to come."

As we read about John and his ministry in Matthew 3, I am struck anew on how John is a bridge figure between the Testaments. He is a contemporary of Jesus, but seems like a man born of another time—more like Elijah in appearance and carriage than like the Apostle Paul. It is as if the

entire Old Testament tradition is embodied in this one figure who proclaims to the people, so hungry for God, that the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

He was both a strong, stirring figure, and yet one who knew his humble place in God's economy, saying, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

But despite this humility in reference to God's work, he was not known for being overly deferential to his earthly superiors. He apparently failed his Dale Carnegie course, calling the religious leaders of his day, a "Brood of Vipers."

This John prepared the way for the Lord, pointing to the one who would be God in flesh.

Karl Barth saw this figure of John as enormously instructive in understanding the vocation of theology and the vocation of the church. The great temptation for Christians, for the theological enterprise, for the church, was to believe that IT is the message. Most fundamentally, it is scripture that constantly points to Jesus Christ. We in the church, standing upon scripture point to Christ in a derivative manner. [CD, I.i, p. 262] So the task of the church, of Christian theology, is something like John's task, always with the calling to point to Christ. But our temptation is great, to make ourselves the message.

Joe is fond of telling, and re-telling, and re-telling, stories of Horace Allen, the great Presbyterian liturgical scholar who taught at Boston University for years. In one such story, Horace would say in reference to Christian hymns, "Sometime, I believe it was in the middle of the 19th century, we stopped singing about God and started singing about ourselves . . . and it's lies, all lies."

Joe has remarked more than once that church marketing campaigns market the particular church far more than they "market" the Gospel. So we learn more about how the UCC or the United Methodist or, perhaps, even the Presbyterians see themselves as sociologically or culturally or theologically distinct from the other flavors of Christianity even as the Gospel is scarcely to be seen or heard.

It is in this context that Barth's lifting up of John the Baptist is instructive. The vocation of the church is to point to another, not to point to itself. John's the Baptist's prodigious finger points away from himself and precisely to the Savior on the cross.

But even this profound point can be hazardous to our spiritual health. We live in a time where methodology reigns supreme. We can turn this into methodology. We learn that our job is to be like John the Baptist who pointed to Christ. Then we start to analyze John to know how we are to proceed. But that is indeed, not the point. I can almost hear Barth's voice. Focus on John? *NEIN!* We are not to focus on John the Baptist so that our vocation is clear. Instead, we, like John,

are to point to Christ. And it is from Christ that our calling, our vocation, our identity, and our mission become clear.

There is a bit of irony even in David Gambrell's and my decision to put this picture of John the Baptist on the cover, for in doing so we leave out that to which John points. But the picture is large, and the bulletin cover is small.

We must not focus on "our" pointing. Even in our pointing to Christ, we, too, are called to repentance: "The positively decisive meaning of the message of John is again to be seen, however, in the fact that *metanoia*, if seriously directed to the coming demonstration of God's grace, the remission of sins, must consist in the vindication of God even against self, in the confession of sins." The Gospel of grace comes to us, inviting us to repentance and relationship.

Barth writes, "John the Baptist too, in Grünewald's Crucifixion, can only point—and here everything is bolder and more abrupt, because here all indication of the revelation of the Godhead is lacking—point to a wretched, crucified, dead man. This is the place of Christology. It faces the mystery. It does not stand within the mystery. It can and must adore with Mary and point with the Baptist. It cannot and must not do more than this. But it can and must do this." [CD, I.2, p.125]

Joe, there are many things that we are thankful for on this day. We do not have time to list all the things we've learned from you about the church. We do not have time to list all the things we've learned from you about worship. We do not have time to list all the things we've learned from you about management . . . okay, maybe we do have time to list all the things we've learned from you about management.

But more than all of this that we've learned, we are most appreciative that you, like John, have consistently pointed us, the PC(USA), and the church ecumenical toward the one crucified and risen. You have always directed us to look outside this building, to where God was at work in the church and the world. You have kept our eyes "fixed on Jesus, the author and defender of our faith." For this we, and the entire Presbyterian Church (USA), are enormously grateful.