

Jesus or John?
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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
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Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17; 11:2-15 (NRSV)

I. The Rift

I don't know about you, but I find it quite surprising that John would send his disciples to Jesus questioning his identity as the Messiah. I mean, John seemed pretty persuaded of Jesus's identity when he showed up to be baptized in the Jordan River. John's appraisal is made even more explicit in the Gospel of John (not written by John the Baptist). There he exclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:36)

Why, then, would John later send his disciples to ask if Jesus is the Messiah or if they should wait for another? Had a rift developed between the two?

A rift is certainly suggested by Jesus's surprising response. Jesus tells John's disciples to report what they see – the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the poor receive good news ... Then Jesus adds a stinger: "Blessed is anyone *who takes no offense at me.*"

Something about Jesus's ministry seems to have been eating at John, and Jesus is well aware of it.

What is so curious about this rift is that both Jesus and John start out preaching the exact same message, word-for-word, in Matthew's Gospel. In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), their message is: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt 3:2 ; Matt 4:17).

I would render the passage a bit differently. "Repent" here – from the Greek word, *metanoia* – means a *complete change of thought* that transforms a person's perspective. And, the words translated as, "has come near," are more accurately translated from the Greek as, "is *already here.*" So, the real message is:

"Change your whole way of thinking! The kingdom of heaven is already here!"

In other words, the wait is over. After so many centuries, the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived and is here in our midst – at least for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

By proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven in the here-and-now, neither Jesus nor John are denying an even higher form of Heaven in the hereafter. They are simply acknowledging that Heaven is sufficiently present to transform a person's life; even change the world.

If John and Jesus are preaching this same message, where does the rift come from?

The rift seems to have developed over how John and Jesus respond themselves to Heaven's presence in our world, and how they think we should respond to it.

Did you pick up on the depth of their differences in Matthew 11? First, Jesus pays John a high compliment: "*among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.*" Then, in the very next breath, Jesus pulls the rug out from under John: "*the **least** in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*"

Ouch. According to Jesus, John is proclaiming the presence of a Realm he has yet to enter himself!

This accusation seems pretty harsh. But what if it's true? If it's true, then it is also compassionate. It's like Jesus is warning John and his followers that, despite their best efforts to purify themselves and follow in the way of righteousness, they lack something essential that opens the door to God's Realm. Presumably, whatever they lack is available. Otherwise, he wouldn't be bothering to warn them to begin with.

Now, here is a difficult point I am making this morning:

From what I see, a great many Christians who claim to follow Jesus in our world today more closely resemble John's disciples than those of Jesus. They seem either to have lost the key they once held to the kingdom of heaven, or have forgotten it somewhere. Or, perhaps they never knew they'd been given the key in the first place.

I find this state of affairs to be true with respect to both "liberal" and "conservative" Christians alike. While they may honor Jesus with their words, it often seems as though they think Jesus was a big disappointment; like they're still waiting for a much different kind of Messiah.

Before we consider how Jesus's Way was different from John's (and that of many Christians), I invite you to ponder the fuller version of John's proclamation for a few moments, according to Matthew's Gospel:

"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 ax 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."

II. The Key to the Realm

If you're still having trouble identifying the missing key in John's message, consider the story of retired United Methodist minister, Roger Swanson. As a young teenager, he stumbled upon the missing key when he least expected to find it. Here's Roger's story:

I was 14 years of age at the time, living in what we would call public housing today. My brother and I pretty much were free to do as we pleased. At the bottom of our hill was a little church. My brother and I would go through the back door on a hot muggy day. A church basement feels cool. And, and in the winter there's still heat.

Well, one day, which in some ways was a bad day, turned out to be the best day in our lives. The pastor was waiting for us. He'd figured out when we did it. Immediately we knew there was something different about this fellow. In fact, the first thing he said to my brother and I, I've never forgotten it:

“Of all the people in this neighborhood, you guys are trying the hardest to get into this church.”

And with that, he did the most extraordinary thing that changed my life and the life of my brother and sister, and mom and dad. He reached in his pocket, [drew out a key in his hand] and he said to my brother,

“Here, come anytime you want.”

We were a family that had three generations of alcoholism behind us. It changed our life, changed the life of my mother and father. When I went away to college with the help of that church, four years later, my mother was the treasurer of that church. My dad was a trustee. And it all began with a profound expression of generosity and hospitality. And still today for me, it's the best image of Christ that I have. That open door, that open heart that says you're welcome here.

They key that opens the door to the Realm of God – that literally brings heaven down to earth – is Grace.

It is Grace that is almost entirely lacking in John's message and ministry.

Both John and Jesus knew full well how separated we tend to be from God's heavenly Realm. Both offered some pretty harsh words at times toward those whose alienation from God affected their actions toward others (as alienation always does, eventually). Yet where John offered only judgment and condemnation, Jesus also offered extraordinary amounts of Grace. Grace is what not only changes a person's behavior, but transforms that person into a New Creation.

Consider what originally brought you into an awareness of God's Realm – and loyalty to it. Did you turn your heart over to God because someone shamed or condemned you for not doing so? Or, did something happen that convinced you that you were in the presence of something or someone who is not only aware of you, but more aware of you that *you* are aware of you – and loves you because of this awareness – and despite it?

Curiously, when someone finally becomes aware of the glorious presence of God's love and grace, this awareness can turn a person either into a bearer of light and life, or into a judgmental moralist – a follower of Jesus or John.

The difference between the judgmental moralist and the light-bearer is that the light-bearer believes *God's goodness* defines us. The moralist believes *our goodness* defines us. Since our goodness can never surpass that of God, we simply never measure up.

Are you a follower of Jesus or John? A light-bearer or judgmental moralist? If you are like me, you can probably find both within you.

Unless I am paying careful attention and exercising constant vigilance, I find that I wander away from Jesus and start following John pretty easily. I get so distressed and vexed by the state of our world that I begin looking upon others with self-righteous indignation rather than grace and love.

I've drifted from Jesus to John when I "cancel" others because one or two of their views conflict with my own; or when I struggle to find anything good to say about a person, focusing only their negative qualities.

I also walk in John's footsteps rather than those of Jesus when I fail to consider the pain and suffering a person may be experiencing that causes them to act the way they do. Such a person often needs grace and healing far more than critique and judgment.

The drug of self-righteous indignation is so very addictive, isn't it? It feels energizing and exhilarating at least for a few short moments. If we indulge in self-righteous indignation very often, we tend to crave it more and more.

Is it any wonder that those of us who strive so hard to be moral, ethical, and righteous often find ourselves weeping and gnashing our teeth in the outer darkness, feeling so far from the Source of all righteousness?

It's not like Jesus didn't warn us. "*Among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*"

How do we get back on board the Jesus train when we've left the station with John? Happily, Jesus has given us the key to the kingdom. Daily, we are called to offer others the very love and grace we seek to receive for ourselves. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."
(Luke 11:4)

That's the key to the Kingdom. And the Way of Jesus.