



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

EXALTING CHRIST

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ NOVEMBER 26, 2023

This Sunday is Christ the King Sunday. It is the day we especially exalt our Lord Jesus Christ and rediscover who He is in preparation for Advent and Christmas. Our Scripture passage today is from John 3:25-36 (NKJV) where John the Apostle shares the testimony of John the Baptist.

Then there arose a dispute between *some* of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. ²⁶And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"

²⁷John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' ²⁹He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰He must increase, but I *must* decrease. ³¹He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³²And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. ³⁴For He whom God

has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Since childhood, I have been taught that humility is a virtue consistent with being a disciple of Jesus. Like most people, I thought that meant not thinking more of myself than I should. It's not all about me! I should put others first and resist any hint of arrogance, conceit, or excessive pride, and I should fully recognize sin that requires repentance and redemption. While all of that is true, I fear that those with a more sensitive and less confident nature may be led to unhealthy self-diminishment as they think about those things. There can be a sense that they really don't matter in the larger scheme of things, or that they are not really very important and have less worth or purpose as compared to others with more obvious and admirable attributes.

We hear that the whole human race is insignificant—a mere speck in the vast expanse of the universe. I'm tired of hearing that! Jesus never said that we were not important! He never said that we did not matter! Quite the opposite: He values each one of us so much that He was willing to die, suffering unspeakable pain so that He could spend eternity with us! He taught us to love one another as we love ourselves. It is hard to love as Jesus loves if we do not have an appreciation for ourselves; there must be room for us somewhere! According to Jesus, we are not an insignificant speck in the universe.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about how God, the Almighty Creator of the vast expanse of the universe, is so intimately involved in His creation that He even makes sure

the birds have something to eat and that the tiniest flower is a miracle of beauty. That same God is intimately involved in every moment of our lives as we are so much more valuable than birds and flowers.

How do we balance appropriate self-appreciation and humility?

The Hebrew word “*anavah*” which translates as “humility” puts it into perspective. Some scholars suggest that this word means “to occupy your God-given space in the world.” What God has created you for and how God created you to occupy that space, tells us that we should neither *overestimate* our importance and attributes nor *underestimate* them. We are to occupy the space in God's world for which He created us, for His purpose and His glory. God has intentionally formed each one of us, and we are called to develop an awareness of who we are in Jesus Christ, how God has gifted each one of us, and what passions He has placed in our hearts to apply those gifts and to recognize our unique personality and style. We are then to apply those things to our life's path, vocation, relationships, and the personhood to which He has called us. We should have complete confidence in our ability to celebrate those things rather than resent them because they're not something else. We must embrace how God has created and gifted us and the place in which He has put us. We must be content with what He has called us to do and embrace the truth that we fill a unique and essential place in God's world according to His plan.

Why are you here? For what did God create you?

It has been said that the happiest people on earth are those who first have discovered their God-given spiritual gift and then spend their life applying that gift with their God-given

passion. When you apply your spiritual gifts to your passion, God's purpose is fulfilled, and He is glorified.

I remember a time when Nanette and I were looking for a painting or a picture to put in a particular place in the room in our home we were creating into a teaching studio for Nanette's private lessons. In that space, we wanted to put a piece of art, and we found an absolutely beautiful picture of a very lovely lady with a violin. We thought it would be great as Nanette is a very lovely lady and she plays the violin. The problem was that it was way too large for the space intended. The only way it would have worked was if we forced it into the space and removed something else. We saw some other very beautiful pictures, but they were much too small and would have gotten lost and not been appreciated. Finally, we found a beautiful picture of another lady, not playing a violin but a cello. It was perfect for the spot, and it looks absolutely beautiful.

It has been said that when we recognize our space in God's world, we don't take up so much space that it squeezes others out, but we also don't take so little space that the responsibilities for which God has called us fall on others. If we are going to worship and serve God appropriately, we must be clear of our place in our relationship to Him. The Bible reveals to us that we must always remember that He is the Creator, and we are the created...we must never forget that. Psalm 100:3 says, *"Know that the Lord, He is God; It is He who had made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His Pasture."*

He is the Alpha and the Omega. Throughout history, humanity has made the mistake at various of times of viewing this totally out of proportion. We think that *we* are the Alpha and the Omega, that *we* are the measure of all things, that *we* are the authority, and that *we* are the ones who know better.

Paul describes in Romans 1:22,25 the deterioration of a culture, and how it starts the downward spiral.

Professing to be wise, they became fools... who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

This is the root cause of the confusion and struggles in our own day—it is all about our self-indulgence. We serve and worship the *created* instead of the *Creator*.

If we are going to appropriately exalt our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as we are called to, we must have an awareness of His space, which is what we are preparing ourselves to receive on Christmas. He is the Incarnation, God in the flesh, which is what “incarnation” means. He is the great I Am. God has personally paid us a visit in the form of a human being, in the form of a little baby. We are taught that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. The Bible proclaims that He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. If we truly embrace Him as the Lord of our lives, He is no longer simply the subject of our spiritual opinion. We accept the fact that our life is not our own; it does not belong to us, it belongs to Him.

How many times have you heard a teenager say to his parents, “It’s my life!” We say the same thing to God. Wrong! No, it is not our life! We belong to Him; He paid for us at a great price. And since we belong to Him, He’s free to do with our lives as He sees fit. Do you understand that when we embrace Him as the Lord of our lives it is not only for His purpose, but for our greater good? He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Him.

Are you a disciple of Jesus?

Look inward and ask yourself this question: Do you merely agree with a set of propositions and call that Christianity or are you a disciple of Jesus? John the Baptist understood this concerning himself and his 2nd cousin. He was well aware of his God-given space. His own father, Zacharias, prophesied very accurately about him as he held the newborn John the Baptist in his arms. In Luke 1:76-77, he said,

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins.

In Bible classes, I often ask, “Next to Jesus, who would you say is the greatest figure in the Bible?” Hands shoot up and someone will say it was Moses; someone else suggests Abraham, and others suggest David, Paul, or Peter. What did Jesus say? Matthew 11:11 He said,

Assuredly, I say to you among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he [meaning us!].

We read in our Scripture for today that there was a dispute concerning John's space, and given Jesus' recommendation, I think we should rightly pay more attention to John. In verses 25 and 26 we see the dispute amongst John's disciples and some of the Jewish leadership about the rite of purification. They come to John and ask, *“Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!”*

John the Apostle tells us later that Jesus was not baptizing but His disciples were. The people were concerned that everyone was going to Jesus instead of John the Baptist. They

thought that Jesus was moving in on John's territory as if John had a monopoly on purification rights. John's disciples were concerned that people were going to Jesus rather than John. John wanted to help them understand that this was precisely what was supposed to happen—it was not about him, it was about Jesus!

First, he redirected their thinking. We read in 1 Corinthians 6:19, “... *do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are **not** your own?*” John tells them in verse 27, “*A man can receive **nothing** unless it has been given to him from heaven.*” This is a very important principle that we should always remember when we think about ourselves and our relationships with others. A person receives nothing unless it has been given by God. James confirmed this in his letter when he said, “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and it comes down from the father of lights...*” (James 1:17). If someone has a special talent, an opportunity, or a material blessing, it is because God intended for that person to have it; that goes for us as well as others.

When we observe this in others are we jealous? Are we resentful? Or do we celebrate with that person? The only way you'll be able to celebrate with that person is to start with an appreciation of your own space in the world, your *anavah*. So, ask yourself this, with what did God bless you? Are you thankful? We are to apply all of that to our life's path and purpose to God's glory. Unfortunately, one can receive great blessings from God and corrupt or misuse them. Now I can already hear some people mumble. I have had people in my office say “What do I have to be thankful for? My life is so terrible...”

If you were here for the Thanksgiving Eve service, Pastor Brad shared a very meaningful way to think about blessings.

He asked, "What is the very first thing you did today?" You woke up; many people did not do that today. And when you woke up you opened your eyes. You could see. Many people cannot see. You were breathing on your own; some people cannot do that. You were lying on a soft bed—a quarter of the world's population does not sleep in beds. You had a roof over your head. You sense it is time to get up, and you can move! There are people among us who cannot move. You can put your feet down on the floor—a quarter of the world's population doesn't have floors. You stood up! How many people in the world would love to stand up?

You can see where this is going. When we start numbering our blessings at that level every single day, we begin to realize just how much God has blessed us. And when we embrace these things and we can embrace our *anavah*, our space in the world, it helps us to obey the commandment in Exodus 20:17, "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.*"

John reminded the people that he had already told them he was *not* the Christ; he was called to *prepare* the way for Christ. God gave John his purpose and gifted him for that purpose; it was essential in God's plan.

John illustrated this with a comparison to a bridegroom. In John 3:29: "*He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice.*" The bridegroom's friend stands next to the bridegroom who was about to marry a gorgeous wife, and he was full of joy for the groom. John continues, "*Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.*" He concludes by saying in verse 30, "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*" Like our life in comparison

to Jesus—we exalt Him! And when we exalt Him, He exalts us. We don't exalt ourselves. He exalts us because our true place is where? Our true place is in heaven with Him, He's the one who makes that happen.

Then John gives his testimony of who Jesus is. In verses 31 and 32.

He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony.

He's from heaven but John is a mere mortal. By using “earthly” he is talking about himself as being “from the earth,” but saying “He's from heaven” tells us about the things in heaven. John told us to expect Him, *and that he* was called to prepare the way, and now he's filled with joy because he did what he was created to do.

Jesus is from heaven, and He brings us what we need to know about heaven. But people don't listen! Those that do listen know that God is the source of truth. Verses 33 and 34 remind us: *“For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ”*

When we accept Jesus, it includes a definition of faith; we believe that Jesus told us the truth. God doesn't measure out just a little bit of the Spirit as He did to Moses and David; they were fallible human beings to whom He gave a measure of Spirit. He doesn't measure it out to Jesus because God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are One! He doesn't just give a portion of the Spirit; He and the Spirit are One. One God! You and I know Him and have experienced Him as

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

John concludes his testimony by summing up the essential truth about Jesus' space in verses 35 to 36.

The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

God loves Him and has given everything to Him. He is Lord and anyone who believes in Him will have everlasting life. That's the same thing that Jesus told Nicodemus earlier in John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* John the Baptist was saying the same thing. But he said whoever does not believe, retains the stain of sin. That's the condition in which we all started, and that stain will remain without Jesus. God, who hates sin, will judge accordingly.

If there is anyone who has not yet made a commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Lords and Kings of Kings, what is preventing you from doing so right now? If the Holy Spirit is prompting you to do it, come and speak to one of the pastors or seek out our elders or deacons—don't wait! We have no idea what tomorrow will bring. We don't even know what today will bring. So, in all humility, *anavah*, what has God called you to be and to do? What is your God-given space? Even more important than that, who do you say Jesus is? Who has He revealed Himself to be? Remember, Jesus asked His own disciples that same question, "What say you of Christ? Who is He?" And as you look inward to answer that question, I encourage you not to succumb and simply answer the way you think I want you to answer or the way the Church wants you

to answer; what is *your* answer? If your answer at this point in your life is not consistent with what the church is teaching and what the Scripture is teaching, ask yourself why. How did Jesus reveal Himself? What did Moses and the psalms and the prophets and the apostles testify about Him? This is the most important answer in your entire existence. They testified that He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He is the great I Am in the flesh, who died for you and rose again for you so that you would have everlasting life. God be praised! ■



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