

January 15, 2023

The Second Sunday of Epiphany

The Rev. Kristian Kohler
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



The Point of Discipleship

“It’s rude to point!” Have you ever been told that? “It’s rude to point!”

Well, friends, John the Baptist must have missed that memo. If you do a Google image search for John the Baptist — or better yet, head down to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston on Huntington Avenue — you’ll surely notice that almost all artistic depictions of John the Baptist have him pointing. Pointing to what? Sometimes he is simply pointing away from himself, to the sky; sometimes he is pointing to the cross; sometimes he is pointing to the person of Jesus Christ; and sometimes he is pointing to the Lamb of God, maybe even cradling the lamb in one arm and pointing with the other hand.

Furthermore, is isn’t just these gestures of John the Baptist that point to Jesus Christ. His words, his deeds, and his entire life as witnessed to in the Scriptures point beyond himself to Christ. We see this today in our gospel reading from John. John the Baptist sees Jesus coming and immediately declares, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” And he adds, “And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” Then, once again, standing with two of his disciples, John exclaims, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” John’s witness in today’s gospel reading brings Andrew and Peter to follow Jesus as his first disciples.

So, what’s the deal with all of this pointing? Well, I have a thesis I want to test out with you all this morning, it goes like this: John the Baptist is the exemplar of discipleship, showing us that our lives, too, should always point beyond ourselves to God in Christ. Let me read that for you once more: John the Baptist is the exemplar of discipleship, showing us that our lives, too, should always point beyond ourselves to God in Christ. So, let’s explore this thesis some more together.

First, let’s think together for a moment about what it means to be a disciple. What does it mean to be a disciple? You don’t have to answer this question out loud, but take

a moment and think for yourself about what discipleship looks like for you. Biblically speaking, disciples are simply students. Ones who learn from and follow an influential teacher or figure. We know of the twelve Apostles, but we also know that Jesus had many more disciples than this. Think of Mary Magdalene or even John the Baptist, I'd argue, even though his public ministry began before that of Jesus. So, what does it mean, or what does it look like, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? To be a student or follower of Christ? Following my thesis I'm testing out with you all this morning, to be a disciple means chiefly that our lives point beyond ourselves to God in Christ. What do I mean by this? Look at John the Baptist first. In today's reading from John, again, he begins by declaring "Here is the Lamb of God!" He continues by describing that after him was to come a man who ranked ahead of him, the Son of God. And then again, when he is in the company of Andrew and Peter, he exclaims "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" John the Baptist never draws attention to himself for his own sake. He never boasts in his own teachings or followers. He never asks for someone's allegiance to an earthly institution. Everything he says and does points to Jesus Christ. And that, I think, is the first and most important thing that we can learn this morning about discipleship.

In the same way, our lives too are meant to point to Christ. Our lives shouldn't attract attention to ourselves, to our own success, to our own merits, to our own causes. Even as ministers, we don't preach the gospel according to Kristian or the gospel of Garrett or the gospel of Joe. Frankly, I don't even believe that our lives should ultimately or solely point to a church or the church. The church is a worthy and important institution for sure, but it is also flawed, and it isn't the be-all and end-all of our existence. The purpose of our witness and testimony should not be to increase our own popularity or even to grow our parish membership. Our lives, instead, are meant to point others to one thing and one being only, God in Christ. That is the fundamental essence of discipleship.

At this point, I'd like to amend my proposed thesis with

an important caveat: discipleship is also costly. Discipleship is also costly. Pointing to Christ in word and in deed is not a safe and secure life. I want to talk briefly about three saints who show us that truth: John the Baptist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King Jr., whom we commemorate this weekend.

John the Baptist, as our first example of costly discipleship, was arrested for his public witness and for speaking out against Herod Antipas, and was imprisoned. In short order, John the Baptist was executed, beheaded more specifically. This was the cost of discipleship for John the Baptist, Jesus' own cousin. In a sermon from Saint Thomas Church in New York City, Fr. Cheng writes this:

In the first volume of Church Dogmatics, Barth reflected upon what he called the "prodigious index finger" of John the Baptist. "Could anyone point away from himself more impressively and completely?" Barth asked rhetorically. For Barth, the simple act of pointing to the Crucified One as the Lamb of God summed up the entire task of Christian theology – and, indeed, all of Christian discipleship.

Instead of pointing to ourselves – and congratulating ourselves for what wonderful Christians we are – John the Baptist models what we are all called to do. And that is to constantly point ourselves and others towards the Crucified One, who takes away the sin of the world. As the Baptist says later in the fourth gospel, "He [(Jesus)] must increase, but I must decrease".

What about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another exemplary disciple of Jesus Christ? German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and member of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis in 1943, later transferred to a concentration camp, and finally hanged on the morning of April 9, 1945. His 1937 book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, makes his position on discipleship abundantly clear. He writes: "The call to discipleship, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, means both death and life." Or more succinctly, he writes: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." As the title of the book communicates clearly, Bonhoeffer's main assertion about discipleship is

that it is indeed costly. Some of us might be called to die to day-to-day selfishness or various vices, but some of us might even be called to an earthly death in the name of Jesus Christ.

That was the case for another exemplar of discipleship, Martin Luther King Jr., whom we remember this weekend. When I was in Atlanta the fall before the COVID pandemic began for a friend's ordination, I had the opportunity to spend an afternoon at the Center for Civil and Human Rights. It is one of the most impactful museums I have ever been to. The first floor contains some of the writings of Martin Luther King on loan from Morehouse College. The second floor is dedicated entirely to the modern American Civil Rights Movement, and the third floor deals with contemporary global human rights issues. When I was there, I got a copy of Martin Luther King's most famous collection of sermons called *Strength to Love*. It inspired me to look into more of his sermons. His last sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church before his assassination was titled "The Drum Major." He talks first about the problem of what happens when your life is about getting people to focus on you, what he calls "drum major syndrome," rather than pointing to something beyond yourself. Again, like John the Baptist and like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr. knew that the life of discipleship was not at all about drawing attention to the life of the disciple, but rather about constantly pointing to the Teacher, the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

Discipleship points beyond ourselves to God in Christ, and discipleship is costly. These, I think, are two of the truths revealed to us in today's Scripture. So I have a question or two to leave you all with this morning, to ponder as you go about your week and as you seek to live lives of discipleship. What do you need to die to in your own life so that you might more clearly point others to Jesus? In other words, what is getting in the way of your witness, your own discipleship? Is it the drum major syndrome Martin Luther King Jr. talked about? Is it the constant but inevitably doomed effort to keep up with the Joneses? What is getting in the way of

your life of authentic discipleship?

Friends, I lift up these three saints this morning not to scare you at the possible ultimate cost of discipleship, but to inspire you. John, Dietrich, and Martin were three disciples whose lives did just what they were supposed to do, they pointed to Jesus Christ in life and in death, and their witness has undoubtedly brought countless others to Christ. May it be so that our lives, too, point the world to Jesus Christ in all we say and do.

I leave you with these words of Martin Luther King Jr. from his sermon "Paul's Letter to American Christians:"

I must say good-bye. Extend my warmest greeting to all the saints in the household of Christ. Be of good comfort; be of one mind; and live in peace.

It is impossible that I will see you in America, but I will meet you in God's eternity. And now unto him who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the bright mountain of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to him be power and authority, for ever and ever. Amen.

