

Andrew, Paul, Martin & John

The title of my sermon this morning, “Andrew, Paul, Martin and John,” was inspired by a folk song from the Sixties. Perhaps some of you remember it: “Abraham, Martin and John,” a song of the Civil Rights movement and an elegy for four men held up as heroes by those in the movement. “Has anybody here seen my old friend Abraham?” the singer asks, calling up the image of Abraham Lincoln. “Can you tell me where he's gone? / He freed a lot of people, but it seems the good, they die young / But I just looked around and he's gone.” In turn, the verses speak of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and, finally, Bobby Kennedy as the singer offers us his vision: “I thought I saw him walkin’ up over the hill / With Abraham, Martin and John.” The song was an oddity in the careers of the songwriters and of the singer who originally recorded it. It was written by Dick Holler and produced by Phil Gernhard, who had previously collaborated on the novelty hit, “Snoopy vs. the Red Baron,” and it was sung by the former teen idol Dion, best known for songs like “Teenager in Love,” “Runaround Sue” and “The Wanderer.” But despite “Abraham, Martin & John”’s rather unlikely production team, the song struck a deep chord in a mourning nation in the fall of 1968 and is still sung and recorded today.

But that doesn’t really have anything to do with my sermon. I will indeed be talking this morning about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as we prepare for the national holiday observed in his honor. He is a wonderful example of the kind of Christian witness I will be focusing on. We’ll also be looking at two of the primary figures in our Scripture for this morning, John and Andrew, as well as at least one Paul. My sermon this morning, though, has more in common with another artistic expression, this one in paint rather than in song. In your bulletins, you see the most famous section of the most famous work of a rather obscure German artist. It is the Crucifixion from the Isenheim Altarpiece by the artist known as Matthias Grunewald, painted between 1506 and 1515. Grunewald, or Gothard, to give him his more likely surname, created the work for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim in the Alsace region of France. The monks’ contribution to society was that they ran a hospital for incurables, including sufferers from a disease called ergotism, the symptoms of which are displayed by the figure of Christ in this painting. There is a great deal of wonderful symbolism in this painting but what I want to direct your attention to this morning is the figure on the right side. We know from his clothing and the words he is speaking that this is John the Baptizer. He is pointing toward the Cross, drawing the viewer’s gaze away from himself and towards the One he called “the Lamb of God,” which is reinforced by the figure of a lamb bearing a small cross and a chalice by the feet of the prophet. Next to John’s head are words from another passage in the Gospel According to John, “He must increase but I must decrease.”

This well-known portrayal of John, in conjunction with the words of the Gospel witness, is the common thread that links the Baptizer with his former disciple, Andrew, with the great Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, with our American Baptist brother, Martin, and ultimately with God’s call on our own lives. How did each of these men and other saints of God point toward Jesus with their words and their actions? How did they allow Christ to increase while they decreased? How can we follow their example?

Let us begin with John. The Gospel attributed to his namesake gives us parts of his story that we do not have in the other Gospels. There is, for example, his repeated statement in the passage I read earlier. “Here is the Lamb of God,” he says in regard to Jesus and the first time he says it, he gives us a clue as to what he means by this odd appellation. This Lamb of God, Jesus, is the

one who takes away the sins of the world. In Jesus, John sees the fulfillment of that which he has prophesied. The Messiah, the anointed one of God, has come to set right the world, to usher in the Kingdom of God. Although his contemporaries would have expected a mighty king with an army, John sees in the quiet teacher from Nazareth the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and save the people of God in a completely unexpected way. The Lamb of God will be sacrificed on behalf of all Creation and will, in his innocent suffering, remove the stain of sin from all humankind. I have said many times in my pastorate that if I had only one message to give the world in my life that it would be that of God's love and forgiveness for all. Here is John's encapsulation of that same message: Behold, the Lamb sent by God who takes away the sins of the world. Thanks to Jesus, all can receive God's loving gift of forgiveness and new life.

John makes another remarkable statement in this passage. "I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." Think about that for a moment. John, up until this point, has been a superstar in the firmament of religious Israel. He is the first to have been widely acclaimed as a prophet since the time of the great prophets ended some 400 years earlier. People have been flocking to hear him preach and to be baptized by him from all of Judaea and especially from the traditional capital of Jerusalem. The religious leaders of the time had come and even perhaps Herod the king. There had been mysterious signs and visitations surrounding John's birth. He had a powerful and successful ministry with a mission from God. His baptism rate would have put Billy Graham to shame. But John pointed towards the quiet man from Nazareth as the one whom everyone should heed.

Only two of John's disciples left him at first to follow Jesus: Andrew and another, unnamed disciple who may have been the author of the Fourth Gospel himself. John's ministry of baptism continued. If he himself was egoless concerning his ministry, some of his disciples became jealous of Jesus on his behalf and perhaps on their own as well. After all, who wants to go from being a part of the In Crowd to being a part of the not-quite-as-In-as-before Crowd? The story is in John 3:26-30. "They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.'" John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." This last is the phrase with which Matthias the Painter chose to identify John and it is, perhaps, of all his great ministry, the word which we would do best to emulate. He must increase. We must decrease.

Let us turn now to one of those who left John to follow Jesus. In important ways, Andrew is a credit to his first teacher, John. Just as the Baptizer saw Jesus and immediately announced to those closest to him that the Lamb of God had come, Andrew, upon meeting Jesus, began immediately to spread the word. Like John, Andrew points towards Jesus and the results are important for the salvation story as we know it. The Gospel tells us, "He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah.'" Unlike the Synoptic Gospels which tell us that Simon Peter was the first to give Jesus this title, here we see that it was his lesser-known brother, Andrew. Like John, Andrew serves as a herald; then moves into the background of the story. It is Peter who becomes one of the inner circle of Jesus' friends, along with James and

John. It is Peter whom we remember for his great faith and his great failings. It is Peter who becomes the leader of the Twelve after Jesus' resurrection. Church tradition tells us that Peter was the first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope. As for Andrew... If our friend Oksana Lucyszyn were here, she could perhaps tell us that Andrew is the patron saint of Ukraine, as well as of Constantinople and of Scotland. But we have only legends to tell us the rest of his story. He disappears from the New Testament record almost completely. He pointed another toward Jesus and took his leave from center stage. He must increase, but I must decrease.

Followers of Jesus throughout the ages have taken the lessons of John the Baptizer and of Andrew to heart. They have pointed others towards Jesus, living their lives as they believe Jesus would have them live, telling the story of Jesus to all who will hear, without thought of their own reputation or gain or loss. Many have suffered for their selflessness; many have paid a great price for their faithfulness to Jesus' calling. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously said, "When Jesus calls (someone), he bids (that one) come and die." Some are bid only to die to themselves, to sacrifice their selfish ego. Others are bidden to give all. On this fifteenth day of January, I cannot but think of Martin Luther King in this regard. A hero of many, he was also despised by those for whom he represented a threat to the comfortable status quo. He pointed toward Jesus by preaching the Good News for the poor, for the marginalized, for those "outside" the majority culture. He lifted up his voice in the service of God, not simply asking for justice for those of his own race but for all. Dr. King called for an end to our involvement in the war in Vietnam and a reengagement in the war on poverty. He challenged the powerful and the rich on behalf of those who hardly dared to speak for themselves or whose voices had been drowned out by brutality or indifference. He did this knowing full well that his own life was in danger from those who could not accept African-Americans as equal to Euro-Americans, those who could not conceive of sharing their wealth with those who did not have enough, those for whom war was good business. But this still-young and powerful Baptist preacher was touched by the same Holy Spirit that touched John: He must increase, but I must decrease.

Martin's vision of the Beloved Community of God is especially needed this week, it seems. On all sides of all disputes, voices are too often raised in hate and in a society that cannot seem to find the will to care for those who are mentally ill, idly-made threats, the violence of words, can too easily trigger violence in the flesh. How would our political discourse sound if all of those who claim Christ would remember what Martin said: "Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love..." All of us who have despised others in our hearts, all of us who have uttered harsh words for those who do not agree with us, all of us who have "joked" in unloving ways about those on the other side, all of us are in part responsible for the sick atmosphere which pervades our national conversation. We are all responsible in part for the burning of the mosque in Bellevue and for the hate crimes that have caused Dylann Roof to be sentenced to death this week in South Carolina and all of us, Democrat or Republican, Baptist or Catholic, White or Black, all of us must repent for the Kingdom of God has drawn near. If our convictions cause us to be hateful, if our convictions cause us to be violent, then we must set aside those convictions and turn to the power of love which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. He must increase, but we must decrease.

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John, Andrew, Martin... I think I promised a Paul as well. I've actually got two of them. Whenever I read or hear the opening of Psalm 40, I cannot help but think of a song which quotes it from the rock group U2. Their song, "40," used to close their concerts with the audience singing along in a stirring, almost worshipful way. The lead singer and chief lyricist of U2 is popularly known as Bono Vox, a nickname given to him by friends when he was a teenager. His real name is Paul Hewson and he is a committed Christian as are other members of the group. Mr. Hewson has become famous not only for his place in the world of pop music but also for how he has used his fame as a platform to speak out for a myriad of causes. Now some would discount him as an appropriate example in this set because he doesn't seem to be suffering much for his faith in Christ. The fact is, however, that many critics tried to dismiss the band early in their careers because of their outspoken faith. Had the group not been so talented, they might well have sunk under the weight of this professional opprobrium. The fact that they didn't disappear but instead became one of the most popular musical groups of the last four decades is a sort of delightful twist to the story I think. But what is more important is that even when they were told it might end their careers to be so intent on trying to live out their faith, they didn't stop. Paul Hewson used his Bono persona to point to Christ, to mock evil, and to do what he could to further the Beloved Community. He and his bandmates have displayed a faithfulness and courage that I find admirable. I can tell you from my own experience that it is not easy to live openly as a Christian in the entertainment industry.

But much as I enjoy Paul Hewson's music, there is another Paul who is far more important. I speak now, of course, of Paul of Tarsus, whose letters form a good chunk of our New Testament. There can be no doubt that this Paul spent his life after his conversion pointing toward Jesus. He was the great first Apostle to the Gentiles. It was he who was sent by God to Europe as well as to Asia Minor; he whose words guide Christians to this day. Like John, Paul is on record pointing people away from himself and towards Jesus. To the Galatians, he wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

The opening of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is especially appropriate to how we react to the stories of John and Andrew in this morning's Gospel and to the memory of Dr. King. After the salutation, Paul writes: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." There is promise for us in this passage and also challenge.

First, the promise, which is already fulfilled in part and still stretches into the future. Just as Paul pointed out to the Corinthians, we have been enriched in Christ Jesus, in speech and knowledge of every kind. What a wealth of knowledge we have in this congregation! So many here are teachers, in schools or here at Good Shepherd. So many have amazing skills to share. We have eloquent speakers and writers. And God has chosen to enrich us in other ways as well. We live in the most advanced country in the world, with warm, safe places to live and plenty to eat. We are so rich! And the testimony of Christ has indeed been strengthened in us. What this church

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has managed to do in the world is an amazement. Good Shepherd Baptist has been faithful in a difficult culture for over fifty-five years. In the midst of an international recession, God led us to build a multi-million dollar building to shelter our neighbors. You have kept this little church financially solvent – despite difficult times and the need to catch up with deferred maintenance and renovations. Meanwhile, Good Shepherd continues to raise money for our denominational missions and other Kingdom causes that are dear to us. God has indeed strengthened our testimony in our world. Surely, as Paul says, we are not lacking in any spiritual gift and we will continue to be strengthened to the very end, for our God is faithful.

As we see the promise of God working out in our lives and as we look forward to the rest of what our faithful God has for us, what then is the challenge to us? Like Andrew, Paul, Martin and John, we must always be conscious of pointing those around us toward Jesus. We can and should do this with both our actions and our words. We must point toward Jesus with our actions lest our words be seen as empty. We must point towards Jesus with our words so that others will understand what motivates our actions. Just as faith without works is dead, so works without words are a poor guide. Like Paul, we must proclaim the Crucified One; like John, we must tell anyone who will listen about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We must do these things without ego, not calling attention to ourselves but to Christ, not fearing for the consequences to ourselves but rather acting and speaking out of concern for our friends and neighbors who will not experience the abundant life without our testimony. He must increase but we must decrease. And, like Andrew, we must first find our brother, our sister, our friend, our neighbor to tell them the Good News: We have found the Messiah, God's anointed one! We are called to walk in the light of God, to sing to the Lord a new song. Let us lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring with the harmonies of God's liberty from sin and death. And let us always, always remember to pass on the Good News. With this spark, we shall light such a candle by God's grace that shall never go out. Thanks be to God.