

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Jesus' public ministry began under the hand of St. John the Baptizer.

John, the son of Zacharias the priest, knew about the priests' laying their hands on the sacrifices to lay the guilt and sins on the animal before its sacrificial death to atone for those sins.

Under this priest's hand, the Father anointed Jesus to be our Great High Priest as the waters of Baptism, which purified you and washed away all your sins, were laid upon Him, to bear your sins to the cross in His sacrificial death.

40 days or more later, as Jesus had returned from the wilderness after being tempted by the devil, again John's hand (and voice) pointed to Him, saying,

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:29

St. John, the Apostle, foreshadows what would happen shortly after this event:

those same hands of St. John the Baptizer would be cuffed and St. John taken to prison, later to be beheaded.

It would seem that John could see "the handwriting on the wall."

His task of pointing people to the Lamb of God was coming to an end.. and it didn't bother him.

In fact, he tells us himself, he rejoiced, not only to see Jesus but even to hear His voice.

But it would seem that John's disciples were struggling with this.

So let's listen in to what John had to teach them.

As follows in Jesus' name:

After this Jesus and His disciples went into the Judean countryside, and He remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison).

Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you across the Jordan, to Whom you bore witness—look, He is baptizing, and all are going to Him." John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before Him.' The One who has the bride is the Bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears Him, rejoices greatly at the Bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what He has seen and heard, yet no one receives His testimony. Whoever receives His testimony sets His seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. ^(ESV)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; **sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth.** Amen.* (John 17:17)

Who doesn't want to be on a winning team?

But "Team John" was losing to "Team Jesus," at least in the eyes of John's disciples.

John came on the scene first. He had been drawing the big crowds.

Even soldiers and tax collectors were repenting and being baptized by him.
Then Jesus came that one day, got baptized, and then walked off into the wilderness alone,
only to come back and have St. John point Him out and lose a few of his own disciples to Jesus.
And now, Jesus was across the river and the crowds were starting to flock to Him,
and were being baptized by His disciples, instead of John's.
These seemed to be signs that St. John's ministry was faltering, losing steam,
and them along with it.

But St. John was quick to point out that this was actually an indication of the success of his preaching.
In his little parable about the friend and the bridegroom,
he never intended to abscond with the Bride, the Church, to draw her to himself.
He rejoiced that more people were going directly to their Savior.

Just like today, the groom will ask his friend to perform the duties of the best man,
so the Lord had specially chosen St. John to be that "friend" to Jesus.
His job was not to be the guy who makes a speech that is really about himself more than the couple,
or to try to entice the Bride away from her Groom.
His job was to prepare the Bride to receive her Groom,
to endear her to her Husband all the more.

In fact, he was the one who aided the Groom in preparing Christ's bride.
We see the effect of John's work, and every minister's work, of preaching and Baptizing,
as St. Paul admonishes, **Husbands, love your wives,**
as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her,
having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,
so that He might present the Church to Himself in splendor,
without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:25-27

John was never to be the spectacle or entertainment;
he was to be the hand and mouth drawing all attention to Jesus, the Christ.
John said it very simply, "**He must increase, but I must decrease.**"

In the northern hemisphere, this expression gave way to the Venerable Bede pointing out that
the Church celebrates St. John's nativity near the summer solstice, when daylight begins to decrease,
and 6 months later, we celebrate Jesus' nativity near the winter solstice, when the daylight increases.

But we don't need to wait for the half years to see this increase and decrease take place.
We experience it every week when we return to our baptism through confession and absolution.
Charles Wesley, though wrong in many areas of theology, saw the connection himself
and poetically described it in the 4th stanza of his hymn, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,"

*Come, Desire of Nations, come,
Fix in us Thy humble home;
Rise, the women's conqu'ring Seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
Print Thine image in its place;*

We, like John's disciples, don't like to decrease or be on the losing team.

It's not in the nature of our Old Adam.

We want to be the center of attention, even if we don't ever want to be the life of the party.

This is not just a temptation of the class clown or the extrovert.

Even the introvert and the shy wall flower by nature desire to have their own will done, even when contrary to the Lord's will.

This is evident in the sins of our thoughts, words, and deeds.

You know that the Lord's will and command is that you not slander or gossip, but when everyone else is besmirching the reputation of another,

not only do you not defend, speak well of your neighbor,

but how often do we even contribute, or at least consider the things we could contribute.

You see the gift that another has received, or the thoughtfulness of the giver,

and you discontentedly covet the gift, or wish the giver would be so thoughtful towards you.

Or even you yourself being the giver of a gift or a good work that goes unthanked,

and you grumble in your own mind at their lack of gratitude, as if you gave in order to receive.

All these examples and many more, show how we desire attention, even if not demonstrated out loud.

Of course, preachers aren't immune from this attention seeking, either.

In reality, it is often a pretty severe temptation, even as Jesus' disciples often found themselves wondering out loud to Jesus, which of them was the greatest,

or John's disciples hinting at how their popularity was waning as Jesus' was increasing.

But John has the answer,

"A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."

Everything that you call yours, is truly a gift, freely given from your heavenly Father.

This doesn't just mean the inanimate objects of your house, your food and clothing, and property,

but it also includes your reason and all your senses, your reputation, your family, your country, etc.

It includes your life and time of grace here on earth.

It includes your salvation through the Father's gracious giving of His Son into death.

The Son's perfect life, given to you in your Baptism.

It includes the Father and the Son's gift to you in sending His Holy Spirit

to give you your faith, your hope, and your love.

It includes your freedom to attend the Divine Service and to partake of the Lord's Supper.

It includes your access to His ministers whose joy and pleasure it is to preach Christ and forgive sins.

It was not just St. John who was to decrease so that Jesus may increase.

It is for each & every one of us to die to ourselves, drowning the Old Adam (our sinful nature) in confession and for Christ to increase in us through the absolution, raising to life the new man,

full of faith, and hope, and love... and joy to see and hear our Savior for ourselves

and to use our bodies, reason, gifts, and resources to point our neighbors, as St. John did,

to the Lamb of God which took away their sins.

"Team John" never lost. The more Christ increased in him and among God's people, so did he.

Even as we have received everything from heaven, so everything is ours to give.

Even, if like St. John, you are called to give your life, it is not really yours, but God's who gave it.

St. John lost his head, but he never lost his life... and his hand and voice still point to Christ.

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” God grant this unto us.

And let it be as the angels sang:

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men. Luke 2:14

Soli Deo Gloria