

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
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SERMON: JOHN, THE DISCIPLE
TEXT: JOHN 20:20-23

This sermon was requested by Rebecca Seglum. She wanted to know about John, the disciple of Jesus. Well, Rebecca, your question will, I hope, make for a good sermon.

I want to start this sermon by saying thank you to Alexander the Great. You see, the name "John" was not popular until Alexander the Great conquered the world and brought Greek culture to the Middle East. The meaning of the Hebrew word for John, Yokhanan, means "God is gracious" or "God is good." It was the sort of name you gave your child if you really liked God.

In our Old Testament it is used only once, in I Chronicles. During the time of the Macabees, after the end of the Old Testament and before the beginning of the New Testament, there are three people named John. In the New Testament there are:

1. John Mark, an early evangelist
2. Peter's father who in the Gospel of John is called John (In Matthew he is Jonah)
3. John who was the son of Annas and who succeeded Caiaphas as high priest
4. John the Baptist, who got his head cut off for annoying King Herod.
5. That brings us to John, who was a disciple of Jesus.

John, along with his brother James, was a fisherman. He was with Peter and Peter's brother Andrew, when Jesus called them to be "Fishers of people." We believe that John's mother's name was Salome and that she was one of the women who stood at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified. There is some speculation that Salome might have been the sister of Jesus' mother, which would have made John and James Jesus' cousins. No one can prove that but it would have been cool, don't you think - to be Jesus' cousin!

Anyway, John was a very important disciple. In all the different lists of whom the disciples of Jesus were, John's name is always in the first three or four named.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus had a nickname for John and James: "Boanerges," which means "Sons of Thunder." I guess that's a better nickname than "guys who smell bad," or "brothers with hairy ears." "Sons of Thunder" could have

meant either that they had bad tempers or their voices were just naturally very loud. Me, I go with the bad tempers because in the Gospel of Luke there is a story that John and James wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan town because it would not receive Jesus. That's more than a little testy. By the way, Jesus basically told them to relax, mellow out and take a chill pill. Well, Jesus actually told them "no" but that's only because no one would think up "mellow out" or "chill pill" for about 2,000 years. If Jesus were here today I wonder just how modern his language would be and if he would be big on twitter and Facebook.

There is one other story in the Gospel of Mark about John and James in which they ask Jesus to let them sit on his right and left hand, the seats of honor, in Jesus' kingdom. The other disciples get mad - everyone wants that big honor but no one else was so uppity as to out and out ask for it.

One more thing, John and Peter were the two disciples who prepared the Last Supper and Jesus and the other disciples. I'm not sure I ever knew that - but if I did I must have forgotten that a long time ago - or last week. I can't remember when I start to not remember things!

Something important! John was the only disciple who came to the cross - the others were in hiding. From the cross, Jesus entrusted John to care for his mother. Jesus said to Mary, Woman, behold, your son," referring to John. And to John he said, "Behold, your mother." You don't do that sort of thing to someone you sort of trust. In fact, in the Gospel of John, John never refers to himself by name. He calls himself, "the Beloved Disciple." He claims for himself a special relationship with Jesus. Wishful thinking? Well, Jesus did entrust the care of his mother to John! That's pretty special.

John appears in the Book of Acts alongside Peter, leading the new Church. Paul lists James [Jesus' brother], Peter, and John" as the three pillars of the early church. But after chapter 8 of the Book of Acts John is not mentioned again in Acts or in any of the letters.

What John leaves behind is his gospel.

There are three letters that are reportedly written by John but their authorship is dubious - the grammar, the theology, and the vocabulary are noticeably different, as some skinny, blond, Yankee in Birkenstocks started telling people he was John Wayne.

And the Book of Revelation is authored by someone named John but it really could not have been by John the disciple! The Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation have nearly opposite views on the end of time. Most researchers think it was written by another early Christian prophet who was also named John.

Back to the Gospel of John. Yes, this gospel was written by John the Disciple though some of it was apparently edited by his closest followers after his death. One of the best examples is the conclusion – The Gospel of John has two conclusions!! This second conclusion is the one Jerry read this morning. The first one was surely written by John but the second one was just as surely written by John's followers after his death because his death was a huge problem for his followers.

In the early church people expected Jesus to come back – soon. Paul told people he'd rather them not get married – it took too much time away from saving people and judgment day could be...tomorrow! I thought that was a bit harsh but people really expected to see Jesus in THIS life. Years went by, though, and people began to die. People struggled with how to understand this – as we talked about last week. One of the ways they came up with was to say that Jesus would come back before the "Disciple he loved" died – before John died. This worked well until John died. The church began to think that maybe Jesus wasn't coming back at all. Therefore John's followers added a second ending which basically told people they had gotten it all wrong – Jesus never promised to come back before John died. Crisis averted – barely.

Let me say a few more words about the Gospel of John, about what makes it different than the other three gospels.

First, the other gospels all follow the calendar, first things first and last things last. John doesn't care about getting things in calendar order. He groups stories and sermons and sayings around the theological points he wants to teach us! He pulls stories from the beginning, the middle, even the very end of Jesus life and lumps them together. So when you read John don't worry if he puts things in a way different order – it's still in order, just not by the calendar.

Second, the four gospels have some variation on how they understood Jesus. John's gospel is the one which most profoundly understands that Jesus is the incarnate Word of God. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This is the claim that his gospel is built on. For John, Jesus was born fully away of his divinity. At each and every moment in his life he was God in human form. John took this theology so far that some of his followers even questioned whether or not Jesus was human at all – or

if his humanity were merely a disguise. The church spanked their hands and told them “No, no, Jesus was fully human and fully God!” But for John’s Gospel Jesus was first and foremost fully God!”

Third, John understood the church to be a community built on the commandment to love one another so that everyone will know they are disciples of Jesus. The Church’s first job is to love one another as Jesus loved them. So, preaching, worship, evangelism, and even stewardship come after love. They should all come – but first make sure your church is one that is known for its love. Crabby people have to get over it and learn to love! I guess this would be a fair moment to ask you to think – “How are we doing on that score? Do we love one another or is it all talk?”

Lastly, John did not believe in some far distant revelation of the fullness of God’s glory and for God’s will for the world, as portrayed in the Book of Revelation. Both God’s glory and God’s will are available right now in Jesus. As it says in John 5: 24, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.” For John, we are not to live in hopes of some future day when God will come – but we are to day by day grow into that glory by working to become more Christ-like in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Verily, the Kingdom of God is coming even now whenever another heart turns to Jesus or another Christian presses on to grow deeper in his/her faith.

OK, that’s the meat of the sermon but I would like to end by sharing with you a bit of folk myth that developed about John. None of these things are really true

1. In the “Acts of John”, it is claimed that at times John’s “substance was immaterial, and incorporeal, and as if it did not exist at all.” (Sort of like he was becoming so Christ-like that he was ascending to a higher realm.)
2. He commanded bugs to stay out of his bed.
3. He was victorious over the Magician Kynops on Patmos. (The equivalent of a steel caged death match – the loser is kicked off the island!)
4. He destroyed the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. (All by himself, supposedly.)
5. And at the end of his life, in Ephesus the Apostle instructed his disciples to dig him a grave in the shape of a cross. He placed himself in it and ordered his disciples to begin to fill it. When they had covered him to his neck, they placed a

linen cloth over his face, bade him farewell and covered him up. Others compelled them to show where he was buried. But when they dug there they found nothing.

Myths aside, John's will be remembered for being called to be a Fisher of Men, for serving Jesus faithfully, for standing at the foot of the cross while Jesus died, and for writing a Gospel that is beloved by Christians all over the world.

Rebecca, I hope you liked your sermon!