

I can't help but wonder what the priests and the Levites were thinking as they engaged in this strange dialogue with John the Baptist. Ask a simple question like, “Who are you?” and you get, “I am *not the Messiah.*” *Well, that narrows it down just a little bit.* This may take awhile.

John seems to be playing a game of charades or 20 questions with us. All right, we'll humor him and play along. “Well, then, are you Elijah?” “Nope.” “Are you the prophet?” “No.” Well, this is a little frustrating. Are we even getting warm? Who else would be baptizing people in the wilderness, if not the prophet, Elijah, or the Messiah? And so the priests throw in the towel after only three questions: “Who are you? What do you say about yourself?” Yet, even then, with the game over, John's response is evasive at best. “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” *That's his identity? A town crier? A disembodied voice? And then he gives them a little more, another “not”:* “Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” Not exactly straight answers, but *something* to ponder, at least. And *someone* to anticipate.

John could easily have relished his moment in the spotlight. He could have made the most of his 15 minutes of fame, maybe even rolled over those minutes and extended them a bit. “Well, let me tell you who I am. My name is John. I'm the son of Elizabeth and the priest Zechariah. I'm a miracle, you know. My parents were far too old to have a baby. But the angel Gabriel came to my father and told him I was on my way, told him what to name me, what my purpose in life would be, and that I'd be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. My Dad didn't believe him,

though. He needed some proof! The presence of an angel speaking to him in the temple wasn't enough for my dad's rational mind! Because Dad doubted, the angel Gabriel took away his voice until I was born, until he'd written down that I was to be called John, not Zechariah Jr. So here I am! A prophecy fulfilled! I'm a Nazarene. I don't drink. I hang out in the wilderness, wear camel's hair, and eat honey and locusts. I baptize with water, but not the Holy Spirit. What else would you like to know about me?"

Why *didn't* John do that? Most of us like to talk about ourselves, at least to a point. We're usually pleased when someone takes an interest in us and asks us to share. John may have figured he had reason to distrust these curious religious officials. But already he knew he was eventually going to be killed for being who he was. So was there really much to lose in opening up to them?

...But, you see, none of this is really the point. What John and his parents knew from before he was even born was *that this, his call in life, it wasn't about him*. John's job was to prepare the way for his cousin Jesus and his ministry. His job was to witness and to testify to the coming of the divine in and through Jesus. All of this was, of course, a huge honor and privilege. And certainly God must have endowed John with some unique and valuable skills and talents in order to accomplish these goals. But, ultimately, John was a servant of God: a voice and a vessel. A particular voice and a particular human vessel, yes. But not a celebrity. Not a politician. Not the Messiah or even the prophet. Nothing too showy. No, as servant of God, John's job was simply to point the way to Jesus. And, by definition, pointing the way to Jesus meant pointing away from himself. The crucifixion scene painted on the Isenheim altarpiece by German Renaissance artist Matthias Grunewald at a monastery in France makes this point crystal clear. In it, John

stands at the foot of the cross pointing a finger at Jesus. Lest we somehow manage to miss it, his pointing finger is e-x-t-r-a long. Here's a copy of the painting I brought with me for you to see...

The other thing you might notice in this painting is that all of Jesus' fingers are pointed upward in a rather exaggerated fashion. Perhaps this is anatomically correct under the circumstances.

I really don't know. But I have a feeling that here, too, Grunewald was making a point. For, throughout the Synoptic gospels, Jesus' behavior was similar to John's in that he pointed away from himself, toward God, toward what God had done, was doing, and would do. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." (Mark 10:18, NRSV) Jesus says in Mark 10.

By virtue of our baptisms and membership in the priesthood of all believers, these same dynamics hold true for us as well. That is, like Jesus and John, we are called to testify to the light, to share the good news of God's infinite grace and mercy, as embodied by Jesus. To reassure and demonstrate to the world that love and light ultimately win... Stated more directly, the Church, this or any church, is not an end in and of itself. The Church is a tool to express and bear witness to God's love in community. And to co-create with God in order that God's hope, healing, and justice might be made manifest in the world. To prepare the way for the long awaited coming of God's realm of peace and justice on earth.

The upshot is that we are not our own. Like the Israelites in Isaiah 61, we have been blessed.

With our lives and bodies, with skills and financial resources and all the many assets we named and mapped in Fellowship Hall earlier this year. Why have we been so blessed? According to Isaiah, because we are in an everlasting covenant with God. As part of that covenant, God wants us to be seen, known, and acknowledged as God's people, a people whom God has blessed. Not for our own personal edification, but as witnesses and ambassadors of the light, God's light. We

have been blessed that we might thank and honor God in particular ways: by bringing good news to the oppressed, by binding up the brokenhearted, by proclaiming liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; by comforting and providing for all who mourn.

Now I realize that, in and of itself, this is a pretty daunting job description. But add to that the history of the big “C” Church, all the ways it has hurt people over the years and is hurting them still, all the ways it has broken trust, all the ways it has offended... and not just some anonymous contingent, but often us personally.

I have recently engaged in dialogue with some atheists and have been interested, but perhaps not surprised, to learn that each of them had had a very negative, even a traumatic, experience with church or clergy early in their lives. Many others in the conversation who have identified as agnostic or spiritual but not religious have explained that, for them, it’s organized religion that’s the problem, not necessarily the Ultimate Reality they may call God or something else entirely. Then yesterday I just happened to stumble upon a New York Times editorial that talked about the “Nones;” that is, the people who will check “None of the Above” when confronted with a list of religious affiliations. According to Eric Weiner, author of *Man Seeks God: My Flirtations with the Divine*, “Nones” are the fastest growing religious demographic: 12% of the population and probably closer to 25% of the young adult population. And yet, very few of these “Nones” describe themselves as atheists. According to a survey by Trinity College, just 7% to be exact. The other 93% said they believed in a higher power. According to Weiner, they are, like him, spiritual drifters and dabblers who steer clear of arguments between True Believers and Angry Atheists, and particularly their political overtones. He says,

We Nones may not believe in God, but we hope to one day. We have a dog in

this hunt. Nones don't get hung up on whether a religion is "true" or not, and instead subscribe to William James's maxim that "truth is what works." If a certain spiritual practice makes us better people — more loving, less angry — then it is necessarily good, and by extension "true."

(We believe that G. K. Chesterton got it right when he said, "It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.") By that measure, there is very little "good religion" out there. Put bluntly: God is not a lot of fun these days. Many of us don't view religion so generously. All we see is an angry God. He is constantly judging and smiting, and so are his followers. No wonder so many Americans are enamored of the Dalai Lama. He laughs, often and well. Precious few of our religious leaders laugh. They shout. God is not an exclamation point, though. He is, at his best, a semicolon, connecting people, and generating what Aldous Huxley called "human grace." Somewhere along the way, we've lost sight of this.¹

Weiner may not speak for all "Nones," but he has not yet given up on organized religion entirely.

He thinks we just need to get creative and entrepreneurial, that we need a Steve Jobs for the religious world. What would that Church look like? Here's what Weiner would like to see:

...this new way would be straightforward and unencumbered and absolutely intuitive. Most important, it would be highly interactive.

I imagine a religious space that celebrates doubt, encourages experimentation and allows one to utter the word God without embarrassment. A religious operating system for the Nones among us. And for all of us².

Perhaps it is the "Nones" who now wander the spiritual wilderness awaiting a call from a servant of God announcing that something new is about to be born. That they are loved as children of God. That God is not angry. That actually, God is merciful and wants to comfort them and bind up their wounds, to give them a warm place to live, where they can be free to be themselves. We do that so well for on another here. Do we have room in our inn? I'm hoping so. It sure seems

¹Wiener, Eric: "Americans: Undecided About God?" www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/opinion/.../americans-and-god.html.

² Ibid.

like some of that 25% must be hiding out somewhere in Wexford County. So let's wear our love, our peace, and our joy on our sleeves.

Amen.