

MATTHEW 11:2–11. (EHV)

While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples to ask him, “Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?” Jesus answered them, “Go, report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor. Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me.” As these two were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

What makes for greatness? What makes a person a great person?

Is it some virtuous or heroic action, an action that demonstrates incredible bravery, or helps or saves many lives, or helps or saves a few lives in a critical situation?

Is it a great reputation and a large sphere of influence, so that whenever you say something, thousands of people hang on your words and pay attention to what you have to say?

Is it a lasting legacy, so that students continue to read about you in history books and have to memorize key dates from your life long after you’re dead?

Is it knowledge? Is it power? Is it wealth? Is it virtue? Is it beauty? Is it completely arbitrary?

Today we heard Jesus, the Son of God, tell us, “Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist.” This means that if we want to learn what makes for greatness, at least in the eyes of God, we need only to look at John the Baptist. Let’s consider John the Baptist’s greatness this morning.

1. What It Is Not

As Christians, we probably aren’t inclined to think first and foremost of heroism, fame, and influence comprising greatness—at least, not worldly heroism, fame, and influence. Although perhaps we do. I’ve met plenty of people who would nod their heads in agreement with the apostle John as he tells us not to love the world or anything in the world, but who then go gaga if they happen to meet some famous athlete, actor, actress, musician, or performer. But even assuming that we don’t think much of worldly heroism, fame, and influence, we do sometimes construct our own framework of greatness out of those things within Christianity, don’t we? Sometimes it’s the heroism of perseverance in adversity and even martyrdom. We think of everything the apostle Paul went through and how he persevered in the faith right up to his beheading. In our minds, that contributes to his greatness. We think of Martin Luther standing up for the faith at the Diet of Worms and being condemned by both the pope and the emperor. In our minds, that contributes to his greatness. We think of modern day missionaries and the difficulties

they encounter while preaching the gospel where it is not yet known, in a language not native to them, and in a culture much different than the one in which they grew up. In our minds, that contributes to their greatness.

Even with fame and influence, even though we're naturally suspicious of Christians who have it, once we've become convinced that they confess the truth, or are even preaching and teaching the truth, we tend to embrace them wholeheartedly and point to them as if to say, "See, Christians can be cool and popular too!" That can happen in a historical sense as a Christian's works stand the test of time. People are still translating Augustine's works into English and studying them. New volumes of Luther's works translated into English are still being published. Movies have even been made about both of those men. There was a well-known Lutheran pastor and professor named Johann Gerhard in the 1600s who authored two devotional works that were translated into at least four other languages while he was still living. Since his death, they have been translated into many other languages and are still read and used today. Composers like Michael Praetorius, Heinrich Schütz, and Johann Sebastian Bach were all committed Lutheran Christians whose music is still performed and enjoyed all around the world to this day, hundreds of years later. In fact, there is general agreement among musicians all around the world, believer and unbeliever, that Johann Sebastian Bach is the greatest composer of music who ever lived. And weglom onto that and say, "Yes, those *are* great people, and they're *our* people!"

But that fame and influence can also happen in the present, within our own circles. When our district president pays us a visit, or when we meet our synod president in person either at a convention or because he comes to preach for a church anniversary, we are wowed and remember the event long afterwards because of their titles and influence. We think of ourselves as having been in the presence of greatness.

So we might initially think the same thing about John the Baptist and his greatness. We heard last week that people went out to hear him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region around the Jordan, including leaders of the people, like the Pharisees and Sadducees. John was a spectacle and a phenomenon. He had influence and fame. He may have seemed crazy at first, but it didn't take long for people to take him seriously, for good or for ill. Even King Herod took him seriously, for ill. He noticed and heard that John was preaching against him for taking his brother Philip's wife. So he threw him into prison in the Machaerus fortress on the east side of the Dead Sea. But one could say that John's imprisonment only increased his greatness, since the news of his imprisonment would have caused even more people to take notice of him, and since it showed his perseverance. But John's influence, fame, and heroism isn't what made him great.

It certainly wasn't John's wealth that made him great either. He lived in the wilderness, wore clothing made of camel's hair, and ate locusts and wild honey.

But we may be surprised to learn that it wasn't even John's rock-solid faith that made him great. "While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?'" Now there are plenty of Christians, even in our own circles, who think that John didn't send these disciples to ask this question for himself, but for their sake. Martin Luther himself thought that. Even though a Christian's take on this question is not a matter of pure doctrine or false doctrine, I do have difficulty with that position. Look at the facts. We're told that John was in prison and that

he heard about the things that Christ was doing. And what was he doing? Giving sight to the blind, making the lame to walk, curing those with leprosy, making the deaf to hear, even raising the dead! Christ was performing all these miracles, but he couldn't see his way to set free from prison the prophet who had prepared the way for him? He couldn't help a faithful preacher escape who was also his own blood relative?

Not only that, but if John was sending his disciples to ask Jesus this question for their sake, why didn't he send more? Why didn't he send them all? Why did he send only two? The only reason it makes sense to me why John would only send two is because he himself was somewhat embarrassed that he was asking the question and so he didn't want to make a big deal out of it. But he also didn't want to send just one so that Jesus's answer could be verified by another witness.

Finally, if John had sent these two disciples for their sake and not for his own, Jesus certainly would have known that. But Jesus didn't just answer their question. He told them, "Go, *report to John* what you hear and see. ... Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me," that is, "who does not stumble or fall in his faith on account of me and how I conduct my ministry and what I choose to do and not to do."

Some will object, "But this is the man who pointed confidently to Jesus and said, 'Look! The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'," as if someone who preached such a thing could not have doubts about Jesus. I would be tempted to ask such people what world they are living in, and if they even know themselves all that well, much less the characters in the Bible.

I can come to no other conclusion than that John the Baptist was having a crisis of faith in prison, or if not a crisis, was at least struggling with doubts that he wanted resolved before he died. Which means that John the Baptist's greatness did not even consist of a steady, rock-solid faith.

The fact is, if you had met any of the great men and women of the Bible, except Jesus, or any of the great Christian men and women who have lived since Bible times while they were still alive, it would only have taken so long before they would have disappointed you. We have an English proverb, "Never meet your heroes," which applies to worldly heroes, but it also applies to biblical and Christian heroes. If you view their greatness in terms of their fame, influence, heroism, knowledge, perseverance, and the like, they are only going to let you down, and if you aspire to be great yourself in any of these ways, you are only going to let others down. At the end of the day, we are all sinful beggars.

2. What It Is

Yet after John's two disciples go off to report back to John, Jesus addressed the crowds and told them, "Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist." So what made John so very great?

Jesus himself answers the question: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'"

Which of the prophets was filled with the Spirit of God while he was still in the womb, as John was?

Which of the prophets recognized the one about whom he would prophesy while he was still in the womb, as God gave John the ability to do?

Which of the prophets was himself prophesied about in advance as the one who would prepare the way of the Lord himself, as John was prophesied about in Isaiah and Malachi?

Moses prophesied that God would raise up a prophet like him from among the Jewish people. David prophesied about the one who would be forsaken by God with his hands and feet pierced. Isaiah prophesied about the servant of the Lord who would be pierced for our transgressions and would heal us by his wounds. Jeremiah prophesied about the righteous Branch from David's line who would be our righteousness. But which of them got to baptize him in order to equip him for his saving mission? Which of them got to point at the one about whom they prophesied in the flesh and say, "Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"?

And which of the prophets, if they had been privileged to do that, would have watched the number of his disciples dwindle, not because they were getting tired of God's word, but because they were going over to the Messiah whom he was preaching, and would have been content and would have responded as John did, "He must become greater; I must become less"?

In other words, what made John the Baptist great was not John the Baptist. What made John the Baptist great... was his close connection to the Savior and his grace—grace that John now receives once again as Jesus sends his disciples back to him to proclaim the good news to him, and as Jesus then proceeds to speak glowingly of him in spite of his doubts in prison.

And the same thing that made John great is what makes us great in the eyes of God: "Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Some think that Jesus is talking about himself here, since he too was born of a woman, and he ended up being treated even more shamefully and suffering even more than John the Baptist. Others think that Jesus is talking about those who are now enjoying heavenly bliss: "As great as John the Baptist is, even the most insignificant resident of heaven is far more glorious than he." But whenever Jesus talks about being lesser or greater in the kingdom of heaven, he is usually talking about people, and not just about people in the life to come, but people right now.

In other words, Jesus is talking about you. Jesus is talking about believers in the New Testament Church. After all, what is greater—to stand on the threshold of a beautiful mansion and look inside, as John did, or to actually be inside the mansion? What is greater—to baptize with water for repentance and the forgiveness of sins in preparation to receive the Messiah, or to be baptized with water and the full measure of the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins already won by the Messiah? John saw the Messiah, but he did not live to see the Messiah complete his mission. We know the Messiah not just as the Son of the virgin and teacher and performer of miracles, but as the One who also suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, descended into hell, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, and who is now seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.

It is your even closer connection to your Savior and his grace that makes you great.

Don't despise or throw away your greatness. Don't exchange treasures of solid gold for the tinsel greatness the world boasts and brags about. John the Baptist was great, not because of his heroism or fame or fortune, but because of his connection to Jesus. And the one who is connected by faith to Jesus and his word today, no matter how insignificant in the world's eyes, is greater than he. Amen.