

John 3:22-30
“Less Is More”

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
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The Reading – Common English Bible:

John 3:22-30

²² After this Jesus and his disciples went into Judea, where he spent some time with them and was baptizing. ²³ John was baptizing at Aenon near Salem because there was a lot of water there, and people were coming to him and being baptized. (²⁴ John hadn't yet been thrown into prison.)

²⁵ A debate started between John's disciples and a certain Jew about cleansing rituals. ²⁶ They came to John and said, “Rabbi, look! The man who was with you across the Jordan, the one about whom you testified, is baptizing and everyone is flocking to him.”

²⁷ John replied, “No one can receive anything unless it is given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said that I'm not the Christ but that I'm the one sent before him. ²⁹ The groom is the one who is getting married. The friend of the groom stands close by and, when he hears him, is overjoyed at the groom's voice. Therefore, my joy is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase and I must decrease.

The images released to the public this past week from the James Webb Space Telescope were mind-blowing! I was taken by the fact that I was looking at light that had originated 13 billion years ago, and I was particularly drawn in to Stephan's Quintet, a cluster of five galaxies deep in space. While I was impressed by the intelligence and the technology that made these images possible, the vastness and the mystery of the universe also made me feel very small indeed!

There are a lot of experiences in life that humble us.

+ Difficulties, challenges, and trials of everyday existence: a job loss, managing the high cost of living, navigating a mental health crisis, and living during a pandemic, are but a few examples.

+ Reflecting on our own sins and just how bad humans can be: the hatred, racism, and violence around us and within.

+ But also seeing the *positive* potential of human beings – the wonder and beauty of all that is good, like a baby being baptized!

So a lot of good and bad things humble us, but today's bible passage reminds us that it's a good thing when we humble *ourselves*. Less is more. To put it another way, when you and I spiritually humble ourselves before God, our *decreasing* allows God's work to *increase*.

John the Baptist probably experienced all the kinds of humility that we have mentioned. He marveled at the universe, even without a telescope! He was challenged by everyday life. John knew both systemic and personal sin; he lived in a society oppressed by the Romans and in which those that were different were despised. He knew his own heart needed healing, so at this stage of his ministry, the prophet humbled *himself* before God.

His close followers wanted him to remain ‘top dog’ – the most popular one – and they pressured him to denounce Jesus as he was baptizing in another locale, but John would not. Instead, he reconfirmed that Jesus was the One they had been preparing for. John recognized the bigger thing that God was doing, that is, the Reign of God, and he rejoiced in it. He was glad that people were flocking to Jesus. Like a best man standing with the Bridegroom, he said: “I must decrease, and he must increase.”

Humbling ourselves before God, then, is a good exercise of faith for *all of us*, and in other realms of life.

I think of the realm of parenting and ‘villaging,’ that is, being a good ‘village’ to young people. They need us to guide and protect them, yes, but not necessarily to hover over them. There come times between about two years old and their teenage years when they need to develop their own independence and responsibility, when parents have to decrease a bit, so that they can increase, right?

Back when our son was about fourteen (he’s thirty-seven now), he was big into the Abercrombie and Fitch clothing brand. He bought a reversible tee shirt, one side yellow and the other navy. One afternoon, he came downstairs with the navy side out and demanded that I tell him which color I liked best. I hemmed and hawed, as I am prone to do, saying one and then the other. “Mom, which do you like best?!” “I think the navy.” Nathan went upstairs, turned the shirt inside out and came down wearing the yellow to school! Then I got it; he was forging *his* identity – separate and distinct from me.

This is just a small thing. There are many other, more serious, humbling points in parenting: driving, facing peer pressure over drugs and alcohol, and confirming their own faith – occasions when parents are called upon to humble themselves before God, so that their kids can move forward. Less is more.

I think also of the realms of politics, the movements for social justice, and the church. There comes a time when leaders must set aside their own ego for the Greater Good.

Maybe you recall, but President George Washington famously declined to run for a third term. One of his reasons was so that the nation not fall back into the habit of monarchy, but move more fully into democracy. And the success of the Civil Rights movement was not only beholden to certain charismatic individuals like King and Malcolm X, but to *all* the servant leaders who were training, teaching, marching, and praying with them.

Those that decrease allow others to increase. Less is more. Humbling ourselves before God allows God’s purposes to be achieved.

So it is that this interim ministry is shifting, in order to pave the way for the incoming *settled* ministry. While I remain full-time and in-place through September, I

will be doing less church planning for the future so that *you* can step into it more. I will be taking some summer vacation, so that you can hear more voices than mine from this pulpit. I will be reflecting on our relationship, releasing that which is unfinished, saying ‘thank you,’ and being excited for your future.

Less is more now. As we all humble ourselves before God, this will create vast, mysterious, spiritual space in all of us for God to work and for us to take joy in it! Amen?