

The gospel reading for this morning was the theme for our Youthworks mission trip to Chicago a couple of weeks ago. Each day centered around this theme and we were immersed in that scripture through devotions, worship and sermon time. The main theme for the week was “More or Less.”

John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. His job was to tell people that Jesus was on his way and that they needed to be ready for Jesus because he was going to really shake things up and bring goodness and justice to people that desperately needed it. John’s role was to help people prepare for their lives to be completely changed by and encounter with the living Christ.

While John was waiting for Jesus to arrive, John was the one who baptized people and preached the good news of God’s salvation. John’s followers were disturbed when Jesus came onto the scene because they were so accustomed to following John. They worried that Jesus was an imposter and that Jesus was going to lead them astray from what John was preaching and practicing.

This becomes an interesting predicament for John. Up until Jesus’ arrival, John has had it pretty good. People are flocking to him. They seek him out for advice and direction and people listen to what he says. He’s got a great leadership role in his community and it seems that people love and respect him for that.

It could have been very easy for John to have taken up a power battle with Jesus. John could have fought to have the leadership that Jesus was now taking. After all, it was John who prepared these people and led them for so long. John could have fought to still be the one that people sought out.

John could have let his ego get the best of him.

He could have become competitive or gone on a smear campaign against Jesus. John could have gone behind Jesus' back and tried to complain about Jesus and how he was nothing but hungry for power.

But he didn't. He knew Jesus was greater than himself. John knew that his ministry all along was to tell others about Jesus and not to build himself up.

I wonder what that was like for John to give up his role and status in that community. I wonder if it was easy for him to simply step back and let Jesus take over or if there was a bit of sadness in having to let someone else take over. But whatever John felt about the situation, he made it very clear that Jesus was now the one in charge.

John's words are so powerful still today, "Jesus must become greater; I must become less."

Have you ever struggled with this teaching? To become less so that Jesus can become greater?

I do. As a leader in this church, as your called and ordained pastor, it is very easy for me to want to have my hands in everything and assume my authority over all the ministries of this church.

But it's a really good thing that I'm not in charge of your finances or property or preparing meals or leading Vision Board meetings or planning the Sunday school year. God has obviously called you, as faithful saints, to fulfill those roles. Important roles. Roles that point others to Christ. By making sure we have the finances to continue our ministry, by preparing our property to be welcoming and worshipful, to prepare meals so that people can gather for fellowship and when they are grieving and when we need to celebrate. Your roles allow the church to maintain a structure of leadership based on prayer and asking God where we're going. Your roles teach our children about Jesus and God's love.

So you see, your gifts are all pointing to Jesus, whether it's intentional on your part or not. Your gifts, when used to the fullest of your ability, build up this body of Christ and reach out to others. Your gifts raise up new believers in Christ.

What does it mean for you to become less so that Jesus can become greater? What does it mean for you to share your gifts, not for yourself and for the recognition, but for the sake of Jesus?

During our time in Chicago, we attended a Bible study at the home of the pastor whose church was hosting us for the week.

His name was Pastor Luke and he began the Bible study with this question, “When have you had to become less so that others could become more?”

And this might be a good place for us to start as well as we’re thinking about how we can become less.

When have you had to become less so that others could become more? One of our youth said that she needed to become less when she was singing in choir. In choir there are different sections and sometimes her section needed to become less so that the others could become more and then they all would sing in harmony.

I thought that was such a beautiful example, not only in her life, but also an example that we can follow as well. What if we all practiced that regularly? What if we all recognized that sometimes we need to become less to allow others to shine?

The world might be a very different place. I think of the previous head of the BP corporation, who at the time of the oil spill, refused to take responsibility for what happened and didn’t have the proper protocol in place in case of a major oil spill. What could have happened had he stepped back a bit and humbled himself enough to recognize that his company was not perfect and needed to take precautionary measures? What if he had become less and admitted that he had wrong?

This also has much simpler implications for our own lives, to become less so that others can become more. To become less of a complainer and more of an encourager. To become less of a hoarder with our possessions and to share that with others. To become less of a busy person and more of a prayer and reader of Scripture.

To become less of someone who is self-critical and more of someone who can see yourself as a beautifully created child of God.

To become less means you gain so much more. When there is less of you, less of ego, less of guilt, there is more room for Christ. There is more room for the Holy Spirit to work in and through you. There is more room to be filled with peace and joy and love and patience and all the good things of God.

And that might start with a simple prayer, “God help me to become less so you can become more.”

I’ll close with a story that was just told to me by a seminary student who is just about to graduate. A few years ago she was serving at a hospital as a chaplain, which is a required part of seminary education. She was working in the NICU and was often called to be with families who had lost a child. One particular day she was called to the room of a family whose child was stillborn.

The family was desperate to have their infant baptized and so they asked this student if she would be willing to baptize this baby. By all intents and purposes, she had been taught that she was not supposed to baptize anyone who died because God had already welcomed them into eternal life. It would have been unnecessary. But she made the decision that she would go ahead with the baptism.

She said that her knees literally were shaking, both from the horrible circumstances the family was facing but also because she had no idea what to do for a baptism. So she asked God to lead her. And she said that as she prayed, she felt her arms reach out and take this infant into her arms and cradle her. And then she used some water that was nearby and baptized her into Christ, even though she knew that Christ had welcomed her as soon as she died.

And then this student passed that little girl around the room so that everyone could say something to her. They introduced themselves as her mother and father and aunt and godmother and godfather. And they told her that they were sorry they couldn't get to know her.

There was just a glimmer of hope and comfort for that family in the midst of their tragedy. This student rightly could have said no to that family because she wasn't trained for it and because she wasn't comfortable doing something that she didn't know.

But she became less, asked Christ to become more, so that this family could be comforted in their time of grief. You see, when we ask, Christ becomes more in us, and fills us with the power to do things that glorify God, even in the midst of our uncertainty.

So let your prayer be today, “Help me become less so that you can become more.” Amen.