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Pastor Jeremy Vaccaro  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*Did You Get the Word?  
Knowing Who You Aren't*  
John 1:14-28

Ten and a half years ago I saw a job posting for an Associate Pastor of Youth and Young Adults at Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church. I spent about an hour that day over lunch with four of my very best seminary friends talking together about how cool it would be to do young adult ministry in such a hotbed of ACC college basketball. Of course, we all thought that Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church would naturally be in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Later that evening I told Diane about the job posting, and she said, "I wonder if that's the little Chapel Hill Church in Gig Harbor, WA." Once we figured out that it was indeed a church in Washington and not in North Carolina, Diane, who always wanted to live in the Northwest said to her husband who never wanted to live in the Northwest, "You will apply for this job." And I'm so glad she did!

A few months later I was in conversation with the associate pastor search committee, and they asked me one of the classic interview questions: can you please tell us a little about yourself? Have you ever been asked that question? What do you say? For some reason I've always struggled with that question. Where do you start? And, sure enough, when I was first talking with First Pres. Fresno, they asked me the same question... argh! Well... uh... my gender is male. Uh... I live in Gig Harbor, Washington. Uh... oh, and I used to have an outie belly button before I put on a few extra pounds. ☺

It's one of those questions that often comes up in life. What do you say about yourself? Who are you? What do you say in times like that? I kind of wish I could just give the phone to Diane at times like that and have her tell them all about me. What do you say when someone asks you that question? Who are you, really? It's actually one of the most important questions in life. And in my final days as one of your pastors, it has been super important for me to be crystal clear about the answer to that question for myself. Can you answer that question for yourself? Are you satisfied with the answer?

It's the primary question of our text today, and in it we find a wonderful model for every Christian about answering that important question. If you miss it, you may in fact miss the whole point of the Gospel.

## John 1:14-28

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup> (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup> Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and[a] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

<sup>19</sup> Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders[b] in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. <sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

<sup>21</sup> They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

<sup>22</sup> Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"[c]

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

<sup>26</sup> "I baptize with[d] water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

If you have been here the last few weeks, you have heard two fabulous sermons about the Word, the Son of God, the Christ—Jesus of Nazareth—as Pastor Mark has preached about John's wonderful prologue. (Mark, one of the things I'm going to miss the most about Chapel Hill is your wonderful preaching; thank you for teaching me so much these past ten years about proclaiming the good news of Jesus.) Today I chose to start with the end of that prologue. The Eternal Word took on flesh and moved into our neighborhood. Look again at verses 15-18. John the Baptist's witness is about this Word. And the church, according to verse 16, has received blessing after blessing through the grace of this Word made flesh. Who is this Word? Finally in verse 17, His name is revealed. Is it Moses? No. The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word made flesh; Jesus is God the One and Only come from the glory of heaven to the grit of earth. Jesus, the tradesman from Nazareth, is the truth and the way and the life.

So what did Jesus come to do? Did you see the answer in verse 18? Look again, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's

side, has made him known" (verse 18). The mission of the Word becoming flesh, was to be the Word that revealed to all of humanity who God is and how to live God's way. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were not only to save us from our sins; Jesus makes a way for us to know God and to live in right relationship with God. Jesus points us to God the Father.

But then there is this weird guy out along the River Jordan who was calling Israel to repentance and baptizing people who were ready to change their ways. His name was John; we call him John the Baptist, which helps us not confuse him with John the writer of this Gospel account. It's important to understand what was going on here. John the Baptist was bringing a harsh word to the Jewish establishment; he wasn't preaching a warm and fuzzy message. In fact, he was causing quite a stir amongst all the important people. So the religious leaders came out and asked him, "Who do you think you are? What's your deal?" They wanted to know where he thought his authority came from.

Take a look at verse 20 for John's answer; it's one of the most important moments in his life. The Gospel writer thought it was important enough to include, because he wanted it to be crystal clear who John the Baptist was and was not. There was so much at stake in the way that John would reply to this truth squad sent to question him about his authority—because his ministry was an integral part of God's plan of redemption, but it wasn't the most important part. In our world, it's not hard to imagine someone getting a little bit confused about their identity when they have people coming in droves to hear them preach and many are responding to the message. It's not hard to imagine others, those people coming to hear the message and responding to it, to get confused about the messenger—who he is and who he isn't. And at the time of the truth squad's appearance to question John the Baptist, this Word made flesh was still an unknown quantity. John was the guy; he was causing the stir. People were coming to hear him. People were getting baptized by him. He was the man! How easy would it have been for John to get fuzzy about his mission? His answer in this moment was supremely important.

So, what did he say? Verse 20, "He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ.'" John is crystal clear; he didn't hesitate to give them his supremely important answer, "I am not the Christ." Underline that answer, because there is something so cool about it in the original language. I know that Mark wants to be the one to break this to you, but I'm going to steal his thunder. In biblical Greek there is a word that, on its own, means 'I am'—that word is *eimi*. If you wanted to add special emphasis on the personal pronoun, you would do so by adding the word *ego*. This phrase *ego eimi* is super important in John's Gospel because it is used by Jesus to describe himself. The first one comes in John 4 when Jesus is talking to the woman at the well and she says, "I know that the Messiah is coming." Jesus responds with "*ego eimi*", I am. So, back here in chapter 1, when the truth squad is pressing in on John the Baptist about his authority—about his identity—he freely confesses to them, *ego ouk eimi*. What do

you think *ouk* means? It means **not**. John tells them, without hesitation, 'I **not** am the Christ.' John knows who he isn't.

But if he isn't the Christ, then who is he? Is he Elijah? The last words of the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi, point to the return of Elijah who will "prepare the way before me" (Malachi 3:1). Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel does connect John the Baptist with the Elijah prophet who was to come. But John is quick to deny that he is Elijah himself returned from heaven.

If he isn't the Messiah, nor Elijah, then maybe he is the Prophet who was promised in Deuteronomy 18—a prophet like Moses who God would raise up and fill with His words—the prophet that everyone must listen to. But, for the third time, they are wrong. John the Baptist simply answers, "No."

Then comes the question that makes many of us squirm—verse 22: "Who are you? What do you say about yourself?" I love John's answer; verse 23. "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

I know some of you like to watch the TV show called *The Voice*. It's a singing contest, but it starts with an interesting twist. The judges turn their backs toward the stage so they can't see what the contestants look like. They can only hear what they sing; they can only hear the voice. I like it because the judges can only make their judgment on the way the voice sounds, rather than how the person looks or appears or acts.

In the same way, John the Baptist seems to be saying, "I'm just a voice. You should be more concerned about the importance of my message than the importance of my identity. I'm calling out with the message of Isaiah: make straight the way for the Lord. Get right with Him. You should turn your attention to what He is doing, not what I am doing."

Perhaps dissatisfied with his answer, the Pharisees ask, "Why then do you baptize?" So, John tells them, "I baptize with water. But among you stands one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." Do you get the sense, like I do, that John is tired of talking about himself? He's saying, "I'm doing a human activity with normal means. But there is someone in your midst, even now, who will do so much more. You're concerned about me, but you should be concerned about Him; I'm not even worthy to be his servant."

Don't you love that? It's amazing how attractive pure humility can be. But John isn't just being humble, he's being prophetic. Jesus, the Word become flesh, is ready to inaugurate His Father's ministry. John wants everyone to know that his ministry in the waters of the Jordan is all about the promised Messiah who has come. He doesn't seem to care about getting credit for great sermons, or about being praised for the number of those baptized; he cares about the ministry of Jesus. And perhaps even more important, John the Baptist knows who he isn't. "I

**not** am the Christ." ...remember? How easy would it have been for John to get impatient with the Lord and start taking the responsibility of saving the world on himself? "C'mon Lord! I'm out here in the water all day, I'm eating bugs, I'm living in the wilderness, and I'm wearing these stupid scratchy clothes. Get on with it! You know [*annoyed*]... forget you. You obviously don't care about this world as much as I do, so I'll just take care of it myself."

Seem silly? Then why are you living that way?

I have a confession to make on this my last Sunday as one of your called pastors. There have been times, perhaps many, over the last ten years when I have thought, acted, or spoken like I was the Christ. I would start thinking that I could make you more mature in Christ, or that I could bring you to salvation, or that I was the one to be praised, or that I was the one to be trusted, or that I should have been the center of our attention or that I was the answer to our biggest problems. Beloved, please forgive me.

It came up again this last week. On Monday night I met for one last time with my Discipleship Group of high school guys to reflect on Scripture together and work together to mature in Christ. They're seniors this year; we've been meeting nearly every week since they were wee little freshmen. I love each of these guys like they are my own kids. I always imagined that I would keep meeting with them until they finished high school, but God messed with my plan. Didn't He know that I still had work to do with them? Didn't He know that they needed me? But God's timing is good, because as I was reflecting on this scripture for this message, the Spirit reminded me, "Jeremy, the guys don't need you, they need Jesus." I'm not the center of the group; Jesus is the center of that group. The best thing I could do these last few weeks with this group of guys was to point them to that reality. Should they stop meeting since I'm moving away? Should they give up on working together to mature in Christ? **No!** (And now you all can help hold them accountable to that, right?)

John the Baptist provides a wonderful model for every Christian leader. Every leader may be tempted to make their Christian leadership primarily about themselves, and every time that happens it is an affront to Jesus and a danger to those that Jesus is saving. Chapel Hill, you have been so honoring to us. Your words about the wonderful ten years that we have spent in ministry together have been so encouraging. Thank you so much. But if I'm not careful, I'm going to start thinking I have a big "S" on my chest. When I get to Fresno, I have to remember that I'm not in charge; Jesus is. They don't need me; they need Jesus. I have to remember that I can't make people grow in Christ; I can't fix bad marriages; I can't solve the economic difficulties; I can't bring all of Fresno to Jesus; I can't even produce spiritual fruit. Only Jesus can do those things. **I not** am the Christ.

Are you clear on who you are and who you aren't? Are you trying to be the Savior? This isn't just a problem for Christian leaders. It's a problem for parents

who think they can fix every spiritual problem that their son or daughter has. Parents, you **not** are the Christ. It's a problem for men who feel like they can take care of every need for their families. Men, you **not** are the Christ. It's a problem for women who think they can protect their children from every bad thing. Women, you **not** are the Christ. It's a problem for students who try to prove their worth to be good enough for God. Students, you **not** are the Christ. It's a problem for churches who start thinking they build God's Kingdom with just the right strategy or worship band or program. Church, you are the body of Christ, but you **not** are the Christ. And it's a problem every time we trust ourselves more than we trust Jesus. Beloved, we **not** are the Christ.

And that is the wonderful news of the Gospel. You **not** are the Christ, but there is a Christ. His name is Jesus. He is the eternal Word, who took on flesh, to show us who God is and how to live God's way in His world. He knows us, and He loves us. In the end, because of the work God did through His death and resurrection, Jesus will have the last word about us. He will have the last word about everything.

Chapel Hill, don't try to live like you are the Christ. The best thing we can do for anyone who turns to us or who counts on us is to boldly confess, "I **not** am the Christ, but I know the One who is." Live in absolute abandon to the call that Jesus Christ has on your life. Make him the center of everything you do. Build His Kingdom and not your own. Let Him have His way with you, and your family, and your church.

Let's just set the record straight before I leave. So many of you have offered such encouraging words to me about my work here in our community. Thank you so much for that, but if you were ever moved by one of my sermons, it was Jesus. If you were ever drawn to worship through my leadership, it was Jesus. If you were ever inspired by something I said or did or prayed, it was Jesus. If you were ever encouraged by one of my hugs or high fives, it was Jesus. If you have grown in your relationship with Christ under any of the work that I have led here, it was. It was Jesus. It was Jesus. Praise the Lord, I **not** am the Christ. But I know that He is standing in your midst, and He isn't leaving. He is working in you to encourage me, to raise me up in obedience to His call, and to send me off to Fresno for the sake of His Kingdom.

Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church, I am so grateful to the Lord for you. Surely He is doing a great thing in you. May everything you do, today and every day, make clear that Jesus is the Christ.

## Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. Spend some time reflecting on John 1:14-18. What do these verses teach us about the mission of Jesus? Why is that important for us as Christ followers?
2. What are the three things that John the Baptist says he isn't? What are the three things that he says he is? How is that a model for you?
3. Think about three things that you are not, and three things that you are. What do you say about yourself? (verse 22)
4. Confession time... what are some ways that you try to be the Christ?
5. What is it that the Lord wants you to do or hear from this passage?