

John 3: 28-36 The Proper Imbalance

(A Sermon preached by Senior Associate Dean Willie J. Jennings
at the Duke University Chapel
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28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.'
29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30 *He must increase, but I must decrease.*" 31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. 34 He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

Dean Jones, beloved and esteemed colleagues of the Divinity School, glorious graduates, families, and friends, I draw your attention to a slender verse of scripture that was read in your hearing found near the end of the third chapter of the Gospel according to John, "He must increase and I must decrease."

Is it possible to capture in a few simple words the beauty and complexity of one's life? If it is possible, then with these words John the Baptist summarizes his own life. John's words draw together all the loose strands of his life and all the pieces of his history. What brought it all together for John was hearing news of that *other* prophet, the one who was with him at the Jordan. The other prophet was now drawing disciples. John replied to that news by making a clear distinction. "I told you," he said, "I am not the Messiah. I have been sent to prepare the way for him."

John's words raise for us the crucial question. Indeed it is the question that binds us all together here in this place at this moment. What does it mean to have your life defined as preparation for another?

John, John, this fire-breathing dragon, this locus and wild-honey eating, camel hair-skin wearing wild man -- He appears in the wilderness shouting the demand to repent. John has been thrust into the midst of his peoples' hopes and pains, fears and longings. Expectation and interpretation will forever surround his life and there will never be escape. John has become like so many before him -- prophet, servant.

Words, Words surround the life of this servant. Words about him, questions to him, interpretations of him and his actions. Endless words. Yet John has only one word, one weak word for his life --Preparation. Prepare -- prepare the way of the Lord. John prepares the way for the Messiah. John's life has become nothing more, nothing less than the stage upon which the Messiah, the deliverer will appear. John has become an occasion, an event that marks the coming of the savior of the world. God has done this to him. You can see God's fingerprints all over this. This is God's work.

My sisters and brothers, the God we serve places women and men in the terrible cross currents of peoples' pains and longings, their desires, their delusions, and fears. And in these cross currents, the servants of God are pushed and pulled by peoples' expectations

and interpretations. The servants of God are always vulnerable to the words of others. They can and will be cut and ripped by those words and they may even be killed by those words.

We could not come right out and say this to these graduates. If we had told them this they would never have come to Divinity School. We would have never received their tuition dollars. So we waited until now. Listen soon-to-be graduates -- anyone who would be a disciple of (Jesus the Messiah) must pass through the fire that is John the Baptist. You must take the same path that John took. You have entered a new interpretation of your life.

He must increase but I must decrease. These words capture the character of Christian ministry. We who live in service to Christ must interpret our lives through these words. That crucial exegesis of our lives through these words can never end, because God will never bring it to an end. This exegesis is eternal.

There is a truth in John's words so basic, so terrifying that we often ignore it. What is that truth? God does not share. God does not share our lives with our family, with our friends, with our churches, with our spouse. God does not even share our lives with us. God in Christ seeks to re-pattern our lives so that his voice and his message become our life. There is no balance here. No Christ and me, fifty-fifty, half and half. Failure forms in our life in trying to find a place for the Messiah's life in our lives. There is no balance, only a holy imbalance.

God has come into this world to do what we cannot do. We must never forget this. We cannot resist the lure of violence as a power that allows us to get our way. We cannot overcome the horror of death. We cannot drive away the despair in peoples' lives. We cannot transform this world into a beloved community.

John understood this – Christ must increase. This is both a plea and a statement of fact. The cunning of reason crumbles before the stratagems of the evil one. The power of the strongest body fades at the onslaught of the forces of death. We can save no one. We have no power to transform any life. Christ must increase. And increase he shall – God in Jesus has broken the power of death and has taken hold of all creation as the focus of God's redeeming love. This will be seen. This will be known by all flesh.

All that remains is the decrease. You are not the Messiah. My friends, anyone in ministry must say this to themselves at least once a day. But you must also say, "I prepare the way for him." The decrease gives us everything. The decrease is not about taking away, but giving way. It is giving Jesus the stage of our lives to do his work. John the Baptist got it just right. The stage must be set (prepare the way) -- all that remains is the decrease.

The journey of ministry is the giving way. The journey of ministry is not a journey of self-discovery, or self-realization, or self-revelation. If you are using ministry as a way to search for yourself, get out now. It's not too late. Go do something else with your life. I

say this only to save you from the disappointment that awaits you. You will never find yourself in ministry. Never!

It is not about you or me. It is about Jesus Christ. We preach and live Christ not ourselves. We prepare the way for him. All that remains is the decrease. And with this decrease, the one sent from the Father will pour out his Spirit on us without measure. With this decrease, God's restoring and renewing power will be seen in our lives. With the decrease, the Son of God will be exalted and glorified through our lives.

My friends, the moment is critical, the hour crucial. Lives are at stake. Christ must increase and we must decrease! Will you yield to the Spirit of the living God? Will you give way to Jesus Christ? If you do, then the journey you will take will be filled with awesome surprises. And with each step and at every stop God will be there.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.