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Kissing Cousins

John 1: 35-42

Every summer my two cousins on my mother's side, my brother and I would all four spend a week at my grandparents house together. Parents were not allowed which meant a whole week of being completely spoiled. It also meant that for one week a year my cousin Saul and I were compared to one another over and over for while my brother was always tan and my other cousin had very dark features, Saul and I were, well, clear. We had transparent skin, white hair, invisible eyebrows! Everyone would comment on how similar we were. We must be brother and sister, not cousins, they would say to my grandparents. Jokes were even sometimes made about how the milkman must have been very blond! Now, of course, Saul is about 6 feet 4 inches tall and we look nothing alike but then, then we were almost taken for twins.

I have to think it must have been the same for Jesus and John. Perhaps they didn't look much alike growing up but people always said they were so similar in other ways. There was just something about how they moved through the world that reminded you, one of the other. And how about their beginnings? You couldn't get much more similar than these two. Both sets of parents had angel visits before the boys were born, even being named by the angels; both were promised special missions in their lives; both were surprises, you might say: John to Elizabeth who was so old and Jesus to Mary who was so young. Yes, these two always were close. Not just cousins but almost twins.

In the last few years, though, John has really leapt ahead of the two. He's truly made something of himself. I'm not sure it's quite what mom and dad Elizabeth and Zechariah had been hoping for—a life in the wilderness wearing such strange clothing and making outlandish statements—but he was a sensation nonetheless. He had incredible numbers of disciples and people really listened to what he had to say. His work seemed important and that's all his parents could ask for. It's all the angel had promised, after all. And in comparison to Jesus, John's prospects looked tremendous! It is always a bit sad, isn't it, when a family member doesn't live up to expectations... Here Jesus was 30 already and no one had seen a hint of that greatness the angel promised. He didn't even have a decent job for goodness sakes! He was a rambler, a drifter—so like John except *without* followers, *without* a mission, seemingly without *any* ambition.

It must have been what people were saying, you know. Holidays would have been the worst for Jesus, you know how it is, listening to his older family members whisper about him: "What had gone wrong?" they might ask. "Such promise wasted. When would he at least get a job, find a nice girl?" In this fourth gospel Jesus is, in the beginning, quite restrained, even restricted. For a gospel that is soon full of Jesus' long monologues, he barely says a word in these first couple of chapters. He doesn't seem to be looking for disciples or preaching anything to any crowds. In fact, his cousin sends him his first business! Unlike the other gospels Jesus does not seek followers. Nor does he offer any message except: Come and see. Nathaniel and the others truly have to rely on *John's* recommendation when they come to Jesus in the first place.

Throughout the gospels we have this parallel relationship between John and Jesus. They are about the same age. They both have important work from God to do. They are both eventually arrested and killed. In some gospels Jesus does not even begin his ministry until John has been imprisoned. Only then does he gather disciples and start teaching and healing. Later in Jesus' ministry some people even believe that he is John, come back to life. There is this ribbon that binds the two of them together throughout their lives and many, at the time, would have even said that John was greater. No matter what people said, though, and no matter what accolades John was given or what titles he was awarded, in the end it did not matter because there was one person who knew his place, and that was John himself. No matter how many followers he developed or how his message grew he was clear about one thing: there was *another* the people should be following and it was *his* message to which they should listen. John knows his place and it is second. He has been clear from the beginning saying, "One is coming whose sandals I am not fit to tie." And later in this gospel, in the third chapter, John will remind his disciples again: I am not the Messiah. I am not the bride, only the bridegroom...He must increase, but I must decrease." Even if no one else knew it, John knew his place and his place was decreasing.

For the next few weeks we are between the church seasons of Advent and Lent. It is what we in the church call ordinary time. During ordinary time we often wear green stoles to symbolize the growth we hope for during this non-season for it is during ordinary time that we read about Jesus' life and ministry. It is during ordinary time that we learn of his healings and miracles. It is during these weeks that Jesus calls his disciples and, in so doing, calls us again as well. Through all of this we hope and pray for growth. During the ordinary times of the church year we hope we will be growing in our faith and in our relationship with Christ. John's life teaches us a very important message about that growth. Though it may seem like a trick math problem, our growing may look more like decreasing. This does not mean we shrivel up and lose all worth. It is not about that at all! It does mean that as we grow in Christ and as he grows in us we need to make room for him. We will need to decrease some of ourselves so that he can increase in our lives. For some of us it will be pride that must decrease. For others it will be bitterness or self-doubt for which there is no longer room. Whatever it is, we must decrease so that Christ's presence in our lives can increase.

John decreases so completely that, in this fourth gospel, we never hear about him again. The other gospels share with us his unfortunate end—jailed in prison by Herod and eventually killed there—but John's gospel does not. He simply fades away as Jesus increases. It is completely appropriate, his fading, for he fulfilled his role. He completed his ministry for his ministry was not about himself or about his message. It was to lead people to another.

There is a story about Karl Barth who was probably the most important theologian of the 20th century. It is about a statue he kept on his desk. It was a figure of John the Baptist. For the most part the statue looked as you would imagine. John is wearing his loincloth and has wild hair; quite a beast of a man. All of this fits with our image of him. The one thing that was out of place on the statue was that John was pointing and his index finger was huge, completely out of proportion to the rest of him. Barth would say he kept this on his desk to remind him of John's role, of his own role, as one who points to Christ. Even as the rest of the statue diminishes that pointing finger fulfills its role.

Whatever is clogging us up and keeping Christ from increasing in our lives may we pray that during this ordinary time we may decrease its power and decrease its sway so that, in its place, we may be blest with growth in Christ. For only then will our lives serve their role as pointers to the one greater than us—to John's cousin, our brother, Jesus, the savior of us all. Amen.