

***The Feast of St John the Baptist***

***June 24<sup>th</sup>***

The highly esteemed theologian Karl Barth had a painting of the crucifixion on the wall of his study that was painted by the artist Matthias Grunewald. In the painting there is an image of John the Baptist. The artist portrayed John the Baptist pointing his finger to the cross of Jesus in the center of the painting. It's said that when Barth would talk with a visitor about his work, he would direct them to John the Baptist in the painting, and he would say, "I want to be that finger."

Grunewald's painting is one of most brutally realistic and spiritually powerful depictions of the crucifixion. Jesus's body is covered with sores and wounds, his head is surrounded by a particularly brutal crown of thorns, his hands and feet are pierced, not with tiny nails, but with enormous spikes, and, perhaps most terribly, his mouth is agape in wordless agony. The viewer is spared none of the horror of this most horrible of deaths. To the right of the figure of Jesus, Grünewald has painted, in an eloquent depiction, John the Baptist, the herald and forerunner of the Messiah. We know that by the time of the Crucifixion John was already dead. So why is he painted into the crucifixion scene?

Notice what John is doing. He is indicating Jesus as the Lamb of God, but he does so in the most peculiar way. Instead of pointing directly at the Lord, John's arm and hand are oddly twisted, as though he had to contort himself in order to perform his task.

He had to so to speak twist himself out of shape so as to announce the coming of the Messiah. He did this through learning to live a life of humility. What is humility? I like this characterization:

***"The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is."***

John the Baptist stood at his real height against the stature of Jesus and said:

***'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.'***

We know from the Gospels 5 of the 12 Apostles were disciples of John's before they become followers of Jesus. John makes no claim to hold on to them, but let's them go.

How hard it is for us to live humbly. It does require a twisting out of shape from how we more naturally are inclined to live. But like John the Baptist we are to learn the joy of being passed unnoticed whilst doing good and carrying out our obligations joyfully and thankfully.

There is an old ditty that goes: "It needs more skill than I can tell / To play the second fiddle well."

In a similar vein, Leonard Bernstein was once asked which instrument was the most difficult to play. He thought for a moment and then replied, “The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm—that’s a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.”

Such is the path of humility. John’s name means “Grace”. People who truly cultivate a humble spirit are conduits of grace because with John we pray: “Jesus help me to decrease so you may increase.” When we live with this prayerful attitude we will, like John grow strong in Spirit and like John the Baptist and Karl Barth will be that finger pointing to Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Grunewald: The Crucifixion



