

January 15, 2023
John 1:29-42

Epiphany 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Switching Loyalties”

“Rabbi, where are you staying?” [Jesus] said to them, ‘Come and see.’”

I learned the meaning of the phrase “brand loyalty” from my parents, who had certain products to which they were quite devoted. We always used Crest toothpaste, always shopped at the Acme Market, and always bought General Electric appliances. But the true sign of their brand loyalty was in the cars they drove; throughout their lives, my parents drove only Ford automobiles. My father’s first car was a Model A, and their last car was a Ford Taurus. The question was never what brand of car they would drive, but what model Ford would be their next car. So I was very surprised when one day while we were driving down the highway my mother suggested we stop into a car dealer and look at their new models. I knew that my parents were contemplating buying their next car, but what surprised me was that my mom was pointing at a Chrysler dealership. Were my parents thinking of switching their brand loyalty away from Ford to another auto manufacturer? What would be next – brushing my teeth with Colgate?

I was still confused when we walked into the Chrysler dealership and began looking at the new models of cars. The salespeople were very helpful, explaining the features of each car, and at first it looked like my parents were actually considering buying a Plymouth; but soon, I could see by the look on my father’s face that he was growing increasingly uncomfortable being in the dealership of a competitor of his beloved Fords. We walked out without buying a Chrysler product, and soon a new Ford was in our driveway.

While I have not shared my parents’ brand loyalty in certain products that I have owned (I use Colgate toothpaste and have bought cars and appliances from numerous manufacturers), I understand why people are loyal to certain products and service providers. There are many products that we regularly use because we enjoy them and find them reliable; we are also loyal to certain service providers such as auto mechanics, electricians, dentists, and chiropractors who we have come to trust. Once you have found something or someone who is reliable and worthy of loyalty, it is difficult to even consider switching loyalties, which can involve taking a leap into the unknown with the attendant risk of having one’s loyalties betrayed.

While we may find brand loyalty to be a useful practice, the true value of loyalty is found in our relationship with other people. Loyalty is at the heart of friendship, knowing that there are people in whom we can place our trust and confidence without fear of having our loyalties betrayed. Loyalty is at the heart of marriage, in which two people pledge their love and faithfulness to one another and bind themselves together in a covenant of fidelity. Loyalty to one's country is a key aspect of citizenship; the oath of citizenship Susan and I took last year includes our pledge to bear true devotion to our sovereign and our country. The great gospel hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing" encourages us to pledge that "*shadowed beneath [God's] hand, may we forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land.*" (ELW Hymn 841).

In today's Gospel lesson, we meet two disciples of John the Baptist, persons who have pledged their loyalty to this prophet-like figure who is first introduced in the opening prologue of the Fourth Gospel:

- "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone was coming into the world." – John 1:6-9.

John the Baptist's first appearance in this Gospel is when he is confronted by a group of priests and Levites who demand to know "*Who are you?*" (1:19). John answers by identifying who he is not: "*He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'*" (1:20). After also denying that he is neither Elijah nor "the prophet," his interrogators demand that he tell them "*Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?*" (1:22). John the Baptist points to the words of Isaiah to give the first positive identification of himself and his ministry: "*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*" (1:23, Isaiah 40:3). After being asked to defend his practice of baptism if he is neither the Messiah, Elijah, nor the prophet, John the Baptist clearly proclaims his role in the story of God's salvation of God's people:

- "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." – 1:27.

The day after this encounter with the religious officials of his people, John sees Jesus coming toward him and declares, "*Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin*

of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'" (1:29-30). This is the first time that Jesus appears in the Fourth Gospel (there is no account of his birth or childhood in John), but Jesus stays on the sidelines and says nothing. The focus is on the witness of John the Baptist and his declaration that Jesus is the "Lamb of God," an image that recalls both the Passover lamb in Exodus and the Servant Songs of Isaiah:

- "The blood [of the lamb] shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt." – Exodus 12:13.
- "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." – Isaiah 53:7.

Identifying Jesus as the Lamb of God means that "*Jesus is understood to protect God's people, mark one as chosen by God, provide sustenance, and provide some sort of atonement for sin. Jesus, then, is the avenue for God's intervention in the world on behalf of God's people.*" (Jillian Engelhardt). John the Baptist also identifies Jesus as the pre-existing one who "*ranks ahead of me because he was before me*" (1:30), as the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:33), and as the Son of God (1:34). John the Baptist witnesses that Jesus is the Son of God because he "*saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him*" (1:32). Unlike the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), John is not depicted as an actor in Jesus' baptism. His role is to witness to the work of God and the Holy Spirit; "*John 'knew' Jesus only because John had been told by God how to interpret the descent of the dove.*" (Gail O'Day).

While John does not actively participate in Jesus' baptism in the Fourth Gospel, he plays a key role as a witness to what transpired at the baptism. While others have been said to have been "sons of God" ("*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son.'*" – Exodus 4:22), Jesus is proclaimed as being *the* Son of God, he who is one with the Father ("*The Father and I are one.*" – 10:30). The verbs "see" (*horaō*) and "witness" (*martyreo*) are in the perfect tense, which denotes a past action whose effect continues into the present. In recognizing Jesus as the Son of God, John the Baptist is acknowledging Jesus' unique relationship with God and hence his ability to reveal God in ways never before available. "*The Gospel seems to be saying, then, that Jesus is not only an agent through whom God is acting in the world but is literally God acting in the world.*" (Engelhardt).

The next day, John the Baptist was standing with two of his disciples, those who had pledged their loyalty to him. All the Gospels agree that John had disciples; they were probably a group set apart by his baptism, with their own rules for fasting and even their own prayers:

- “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to [Jesus], ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’” – Mark 2:18.
- “Then they said to him, ‘John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.’” – Luke 5:33.
- “[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, and John taught his disciples.’” – Luke 11:1.

There is also evidence that persons continued to follow John the Baptist’s teaching even after his death (“*[Apollos] had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.*” – Acts 18:25). As John is standing with two of these disciples who had pledged their loyalty to him and to his teachings, “*he watched Jesus walk by, [and] he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’*” (1:36). The significance of John’s witness is that “*the two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.*” (1:37). John hereby fulfills his mission as “*a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*” (1:7). In pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God, he is essentially teaching his disciples that the time has come for them to switch their loyalties from him to the one who is the true light, the fulfillment of God’s promise of the Messiah who will be the Saviour of all people. Following John the Baptist will no longer be an option for these disciples; after his testimony, John simply disappears from the scene (although his imprisonment and death are mentioned later in the Gospel). He has fulfilled his role in the gospel story: “*he has led others to Jesus, and his witness will not be replaced by his disciples’ own experience of Jesus.*” (O’Day). Having heard the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus, his two disciples begin a new journey of discipleship: they follow Jesus. The verb “to follow” (*akoloutho*) can serve as a metaphor for discipleship:

- “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’” – 8:12.
- “When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” – 10:4.
- “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.” – 12:26.

When Jesus turns and sees these disciples of John now following him, he initiates the conversation by asking them, *“What are you looking for?”* (1:38). It is a question to these would-be disciples that is also a question that may be asked of any person who seeks to follow Jesus:

- “In the beginning of the process of discipleship it is Jesus who takes the initiative by asking a question that he addresses to every one who would follow him: ‘What are you looking for?’ The question touches on the basic need for people that causes them to turn to God.” – Raymond Brown.

The two disciples of John respond by asking Jesus *“Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying?”* (1:38). They recognize Jesus as a teacher of God’s Word and want to learn from him. Jesus responds with an invitation to *“Come and see”* (1:39), an invitation that Jesus will make in various ways throughout the Gospel and that his followers will in turn make to others (*‘Philip said to Nathaniel, ‘Come and see’* – 1:46). While he does not answer the disciples’ question directly, he issues an invitation that will allow them to find the answer for themselves, an offer to see Jesus with the eyes of faith (*“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”* – 14:9). The disciples respond to Jesus invitation: *“They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.”* Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the theme of “coming” to Jesus will be used to describe faith (*“But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done by God”* – 3:21) while “seeing” Jesus with perception is another Johannine description of faith: *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”* (1:14). The story of the two new disciples of Jesus would be incomplete until their witness brings others to Jesus. We learn that one of these new disciples was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. His first act as a disciple of Jesus is to find his brother and announce to him that *“we have found the Messiah (which is translated Anointed).”* (1:41). In the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition, kings, high priests, and some prophets were anointed (*“Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.”* – 1 Samuel 16:13). Over time, especially during and after the Babylonian captivity, messianic expectations grew into an anticipation of a future messiah who would be an heir to king David and fulfill God’s promises to Israel (*“So when they had come together, [the disciple asked Jesus], ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’”* – Acts 1:6). After proclaiming to his brother that the long-expected Messiah has been found, Andrew brings his brother to Jesus; when Jesus sees Simon, he announces that *“you are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).”* (1:42). The changing of a name

in the Bible marked a fundamental change in the person's identity and purpose; in giving Simon the name Peter, Jesus declares to Peter his role in God's plan. As Abram became Abraham (*"No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor to a multitude of nations"* – Genesis 17:5) and Jacob became Israel (*"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."* – Genesis 32:28), so now Simon becomes *kephas*, "the Rock," the foundation of the church that Jesus will build (*"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."* – Matthew 16:18). At the end of the Gospel, Jesus will entrust his sheep to Peter and give Peter a unique share in his role as the Good Shepherd when he calls this disciple to *"feed my sheep"* (21:17). Switching their loyalties from John the Baptist to Jesus must have been a profoundly traumatic experience for his disciples; yet it is a decision that they make without hesitation, for they know that John's role as the one who brings people to the true light has been fulfilled for them when he points them to Jesus and then steps back to allow them to follow the true source of light and life:

- "Jesus invites his new disciples into participation with him. He invites them to follow him further to discover what they seek to know." – Engelhardt.

The invitation to discipleship is an invitation that is issued to persons of every generation, an invitation that compels us to switch our loyalties away from anything or anyone else who would demand our complete allegiance to follow the one who is the true Messiah, God's anointed one, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the one who has redeemed us from *"sin, death, and the power of the devil ... in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true."* (*Small Catechism*).

- "We are invited to identify ourselves with these two disciples in the Gospel and heed Jesus' invitation, 'Come, and you will see.' For it is only in coming to Jesus, the Word made flesh, and abiding in him that we will find the fulfillment and happiness for which we were created." – Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV.

While a decision by my parents to switch their loyalty from Ford to Chrysler would have been surprising, in the grand scheme of things it would not have been life-altering. In following Jesus, we are called to make a life-altering decision to place all our trust; for once *"you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned*

to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” (1 Peter 2:25). As we have renounced loyalties to anything and anyone else who would seek out allegiance, may our loyalties remain true to the one who is the true source of light and life. May we remain loyal to the one who will always lead us faithfully, abide with us, and provide for us; as God’s people, may we be loyal followers of the one who is our true Redeemer, Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.

Amen.