

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
2 July 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
5th Sunday after Pentecost / 4th of July Weekend

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“John”

Fifth sermon in the summer series, “Seeing Ourselves in the Twelve”

*Matthew 4:21-22; Mark 3:16-17; Luke 9:52b-55; Mark 10:35-37, 41
Luke 8:51, 54-55; Matthew 17:1-2; John 13:21-24; Mark 14:32-34; John 19:25-27
John 20:1-8; John 21:4-7; John 21:24-25; Acts 4:1-4, 13; Galatians 2:9-10*

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Today we seek to see ourselves in the disciple John. And let me just say that if you think we had a lot of scripture readings today, it's *nothing* compared to the full breadth of references and stories and writings we have *about* John and *by* John. It took me longer to pare down and choose which scriptures I was going to use today than it did to write this sermon! Unlike the other disciples we've looked at thusfar this summer, we have pages upon pages of material about John. So – it's almost impossible *not* to see ourselves in John's journey at least at some point along the way.

He's also a bit more relatable because he is the *only disciple* that was not martyred or crucified. Thanks be to God, right? Every other disciple's life was cut short by religious and political persecution, and of course, Jesus' life was too.

We Western Christians who call ourselves Jesus' disciples today take for granted (most of us) that we can gather in this sanctuary this morning without fear of persecution or death because of our faith.

This July 4th weekend we honor Baptist heroes like John Leland; another John who, too, was a powerful disciple of Jesus. John Leland was a fierce advocate for religious freedom during the early years of the United States, supporting separation of church and state and the freedom of individuals to practice their religion without interference from the government. Leland had a big influence on James Madison, who of course, was instrumental in drafting and ratifying the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Of this influence, we Baptists can be proud. Leland, who had preached 8,000 sermons by his 80th birthday, is an example of devoting one's life to the cause of protecting

civil and religious rights throughout his life. In fact his tombstone reads: *“Here lies the body of John Leland, who labored 67 years to promote piety and vindicate the civil and religious rights of all...”*¹

Leland lived his faith out loud and in public; and his witness is a reminder to us today that we as Christians have a responsibility to speak out loud about religious freedom, especially as Christian Nationalists are getting louder and louder wanting to equate being an American with being a Christian, and a certain brand of Christian at that.

Leland himself had little patience for those who would use religion as an election issue. In a Fourth of July sermon in 1802, Leland warned, *“Guard against those men who make a great noise about religion, in choosing representatives. It is electioneering. If they knew the nature and worth of religion, they would not debauch it to such shameful purposes. If pure religion is the criterion to denominate candidates, those who make a noise about it must be rejected; for their wrangle*

*about it, proves that they are void of it. Let honesty, talents and quick despatch, characterise the [candidate] of your choice.”*²

Thanks to Leland and other Baptist freedom advocates, we are able to follow Jesus freely today. And if we want our lives to emulate any disciple, I’m guessing it might be John, not only because we’d rather not be martyred for our faith (and make no mistake, John *was* persecuted and arrested for his ministry, as we read in the Acts 4 text), but because he lived a long life, perhaps up through his 90s and most likely died of natural causes.

With such a long life and ministry, and with so many stories and anecdotes and references to work with, I found myself approaching this sermon today very similar to how I approach preparing for a memorial service. Listening to different perspectives and stories and weaving them together to see what twists and turns in John’s journey reveal to us the lasting characteristics of his discipleship.

¹ John E. Ferguson Jr., “John Leland, *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, accessed on July 2 2023 at <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1219/john-leland>.

² <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1219/john-leland>

And truth be told, we could have a whole summer series just on John and still have material left over. I left out more scriptures and stories and writings about John than I included in today's service. So if your favorite was not included, my apologies! I chose to focus mostly on what we know about John's life through the Gospels, barely touching on his ministry after Jesus' death and resurrection, and leaving out much of his own writing.

And a quick word about his writing. For many years, it was thought that the disciple John wrote the Gospel of John, the three epistles (epistle is a fancy word for 'letter') of John – 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John – and the book of Revelation. Now, as you might imagine, scholars debate all of this but it is generally believed that the disciple John also wrote the gospel of John, it's less believed that this is the same John that wrote the book of Revelation, and what scholars say about the letters fall somewhere in between. Even if it wasn't the same John who wrote all of this material, it was someone who wrote in the "school of John" or who admired him and wanted to use his name and authority – so that alone is significant when

we think about John's impact and influence. Think of it like the Bible times version of "Chat GPT" – someone who admired John's writing and sought to use his style to emulate him as best they could. But beyond what we do *not* know, we do know that John was a writer, and a poetic, metaphorical, mystical one at that. He loved God's love and what it meant for our world and his own life. And that love was rooted in his time on earth with Jesus.

Before John followed Jesus, he followed John the Baptist. So we know he was already a seeker, even as he would become a very seasoned man of faith. And as we'll see throughout this sermon – there are these pairings about John's personality and life that are paradoxical – and this is one of them – that he's a seeker of truth personally even as he projects a seasoned understanding of faith publicly. He perhaps has the most experience with Jesus, the most 'facetime' one on one with him, and yet still has questions, wonderings, and a hunger to know more. John stays close to Jesus throughout his life, even when others flee. For example, as Jesus is sharing the last supper with his disciples, John

is laying intimately close to Jesus “reclining close to his heart” the text says, and when Peter has a question about who Jesus is referring to as he speaks about betrayal, Peter does not ask Jesus himself, but rather leans over to John to ask John to ask Jesus. This shows that John had an emotional closeness, not just a physical closeness to Jesus...and the other disciples knew it.

We also know that John is the only disciple who is present as Jesus is dying. Except for all the women of course – they are all there. But John is the only male disciple named at the foot of the cross. He is with Jesus to the end. John is present. Even in the hard times.

And this loving commitment to presence is perhaps why, on Easter morning as John and Peter run to the tomb following the words of Mary, John runs the fastest – reaching the tomb first. But – in that moment, paradoxically – John hesitates. He looks in, but does not enter. Perhaps overcome with the reality of what he is experiencing. He eventually goes in and believes, but this hesitation reveals something about John to us. He teaches us something in that pause; that it’s

okay to reflect before responding. That he needed to take a beat, collect himself, and then enter in.

The opposite happens a few days later when John and the others have resumed their pre-discipleship jobs – fishing – and upon hearing the voice of a man on the shoreline telling them to cast their nets on the other side John knows that is Jesus who is speaking to them and says quickly and excitedly, “*It is the Lord!*” John recognizes the presence and power of Jesus immediately. Perhaps because he had been present with Jesus so many times before.

You see, John was part of the “inner circle” of disciples, along with his brother, James, and Peter. These three were privy to special encounters and moments with Jesus that other disciples were not invited to be a part of.

John was present at special healings, one of them especially powerful as he witnessed Jesus healing a young girl back from the brink of death. The young girl’s mother and father were in the room, and just a few disciples – I imagine it’s like being in an ICU room around a loved one. As a pastor it is always holy ground to be

invited into that intimate space – knowing that few people are allowed in – and here John was...there...present for this powerful life-changing moment for this girl and her family. And witnessing that can't help but change *you*, the witness, too.

John was also invited to the mountaintop to experience the Transfiguration of Jesus – a miracle yes, but also a mystical moment of revelation about who Jesus was and his connection to his ancestors in the faith.

John was also one of the disciples invited to be with Jesus on one of the most vulnerable nights in his life as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and cried out to God. Jesus was grieved, distressed, agitated. I don't know about you – but when I'm in that state – I either want to be alone or only with really really close friends or family. People who know how to “be” with me in my pain and not “fix” me or “help me out” of my pain. John was one of the ones Jesus chose to be present with him in the Garden on that very long and dark night of the soul.

These examples reveal just how close John was to Jesus and Jesus to John. It feels like a

deeper relationship than mere disciple; these were deep friends, beloved companions, loyal and loving.

Perhaps the depth of the trust Jesus had in John is revealed most in the moment he is dying on the cross and says to his own mother, “here is your son” and says to John “here is your mother,” inviting John to care for his mother as if he was caring for his own. And John says “yes.” And he allows Jesus' mom to care for him too. Jesus invites them to form a new family – and it's not because John didn't have a family...he very much did.

John was a son and a brother, in what seems to be a tight knit family. John had a family business with his dad Zebedee and his brother James – they were fishing partners with Peter. He was close enough to his brother James that they appeared to have that brotherly sense of competitiveness and edge to them – nicknamed the “Sons of Thunder” perhaps for their tempers and temperaments. An example of John's temper is that he and James want to call down fire on a village of Samaritans when they do not show welcome to Jesus. They also have an **ego** – telling Jesus

that they would like to sit on his right and on his left – places of honor and glory. This, not surprisingly, made the other ten disciples angry. No wonder these two were called the “*Sons of Thunder!*” They definitely stirred things up. And you have to have a little bit of ego to name yourself the “beloved disciple” in your own gospel. Just sayin’.

And let’s not forget John’s mom, Salome – who was one of the women who went to Jesus’ tomb to anoint his body with spices. This tells us his mom was close to Jesus, which means John probably had his whole family around in close proximity during the entirety of Jesus’ ministry. This is worth noting because the other disciples literally had to leave their families and homes to follow Jesus. It really is quite remarkable to think about what it means to be a disciple with members of your family, and not apart from your family.

This is one of the most unique aspects of both John and James that I invite us to reflect upon in our own discipleship. When do our family relationships enhance our discipleship and faith, and when do they hinder it? When do we need to forge our own

way apart from family and when do we need to bring family along with us? What does it mean to have family that we are given at birth and family that we choose and claim? It seems that John had both; he was situated between his family of origin and his chosen family of faith.

Another paradox about John is this phrase in Acts 4 where he is described as “uneducated and ordinary.” This made John (and Peter) all the more amazing to the religious authorities of the day. They were impressed with how bold and courageous and effective John and Peter were in their ministry despite not having a formal education. Yet even still John was an exquisite writer – able to boil down complex ideas into metaphors to explain the unexplainable. Think about the I AM statements in John’s gospel: *I am the Bread of Life, I am the Light of the World, I am the Good Shepherd*, and so forth. Beloved and cherished phrases and images for us; John made Jesus’ life and love tangible and understandable to us in very everyday kind of ways.

And John lived courageously and faithfully throughout his life – carrying on Jesus’ mission so powerfully that the Apostle Paul

actually names John in Galatians 2 as a “pillar of faith” and as an inspiration to Paul and Barnabus, mentoring them in discipleship and extending the “right hand of fellowship” to them. It seems that all the time and love Jesus invested into John paid off as John was able to invest that same time and love into Paul and Paul into all the other church leaders he mentored.

This is the gift of a long life, isn't it? With each passing year, and each lesson learned, we learn that our lives make a difference. Our paradoxes are not problems to be fixed but rather just nuances of our personality to be celebrated and to be used by God. We are complex beings; we do not always act one way or respond consistently. We are emotional beings; we ebb and flow; we react and sometimes we are proactive. As I often say, Jesus does not ask us to be perfect, but to be present. And John was definitely present.

From family man to fisherman to follower of Jesus to evangelizer and mentor and writer, the legacy of John's life is that he lived his life with faithfulness and fullness – up until the very end. He allowed

God to use him in different seasons of his life in different ways. As we sit here today, I'd like us to imagine that we, too, will have a long life to be a disciple of Jesus. Some of us may have a handful of years left, others many more – the truth is, none of us know how long we will live. But what we do know is that one day we will die, and life as we know it on this earth will be over. So it begs the question: how are we living this life? This one “wild and precious life” that we have been given...as poet Mary Oliver would say.

John brought the whole of who he was into his discipleship and faith. And he allowed his gifts and graces to develop over time and to serve – not only Jesus – but the world. All those moments that he shared with Jesus, resting next to him at the last supper, sitting beside him in the garden (falling asleep though he did!), witnessing miraculous healings, going up to mountaintops for spiritual highs and coming back down to continue day-to-day ministry...John allowed all of these moments to shape his heart and his faith...it was a lifelong journey of growth.

You see, with the Gift of Life (especially long life) comes the Responsibility *to* Life. And not just to our own lives but to the Life of the collective...the Life of the Divine as reflected in each and every person. We have a responsibility as disciples to be bold and courageous in how we live. To speak up and out for love, for truth, for justice, for freedom for *all*.

Back to our other John for today for a moment...John Leland. In 1789, John Leland read this Resolution for the General Committee of Virginia Baptists meeting in Richmond, Virginia: *"Resolved, that slavery is a violent deprivation of rights of nature and inconsistent with a republican government [little "r" republican meaning a government where the power rests with the people], and therefore, recommend it to our brethren to make use of every legal measure [possible] to extirpate this horrid evil from the land; and pray Almighty God that our honorable legislature may have it in their power to [courageously] proclaim the great jubilee, consistent with the principles of good [and just] policy."*³

Leland named slavery for what it was – evil. It is precisely this boldness in calling out evil for what it is that we must reclaim today in our faith. 1 John 3:16 reads: *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."*

In This Age, as in Every Age, we must decide what it means to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters, and all of our siblings – especially and including our fellow citizens of this country. We cannot fully Independence Day on July 4th, as we are still waiting for, as Leland invoked the biblical term, **true jubilee** – that is freedom and restoration for all people; not only freedom from slavery and enslavement, but relief and release of debts, and the establishment of equity for all people to have access to education and health care and to be able to live and maintain a life without bondage or debt or discrimination or barriers.

The Supreme Court issued rulings this week that make our call as people of faith to speak up that much stronger. To strike down affirmative action and say

³ Accessed on July 2, 2013 at <http://pblib.org/faithfulness.html>.

that we live in a race-neutral society is to ignore the impact and legacy of slavery that has never yet been atoned for or named in our country and to ignore how Jim Crow laws of each generation continue to embed racism into our systems and our psyches.

To say that race is not a factor to be considered in education is to ignore the lived experience and reality of generations of black and brown people. As Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson wrote in her dissent, “*Deeming race irrelevant in law does not make it so in life.*”⁴

And we, we are a people who are called to create not just life but *abundant life* for all people, as John writes in chapter 10 of his gospel. Access to education is central for life abundant.

It is even more unjust that the Court, in effect, is saying that it is okay for neuro-divergence or differently abled-ness to be a factor in admissions, but not race. It is okay for socio-economic level to be factor in admissions, but not race. It is okay to consider privilege and class in admissions, through

being a legacy student due to family ties or generous donations, but not race. And in fact – it’s okay for military schools to consider race, further sending the message that the bodies of black and brown people may be used by this country – sacrificed and harmed – but their minds may not be nurtured in higher education. How is it that racial diversity is important for national security in the military but not national success in all sectors of our society?

Race is the central issue that has affected access to education since the founding of our country. Those who were enslaved were prohibited from learning to read. Schools were segregated under the illusion of “separate but equal” but they were anything but equal in standards, supplies, experiences, and quality. Red-lining and gentrification and school choice exacerbate this and continue it today. These disparities in education have long lasting effects and continue to affect jobs, pay, power, and livelihoods, not to mention the incarceration rate.⁵

⁴ Justice Jackson’s dissent accessed on July 2, 2023 at <https://time.com/6291230/affirmative-action-dissent-jackson-sotomayor/>.

⁵ <https://www.clasp.org/blog/mitigating-criminalization-black-children-through-federal-relief/>

Likewise, we saw rulings this week that voted against the Biden Administration's plan to offer federal student loan debt forgiveness, which would have benefited 40 million Americans (allowing pathways for economic growth and stability for people across all races and classes) and then a ruling related to a case here in Colorado that allows certain businesses to discriminate against Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer people based on first amendment rights.

Queer people have never demanded any special rights. They just demand the right to exist in public and live their lives in public, whether that means being a patron at a business or using the bathroom at a school or getting married in courthouse or getting healthcare that meets their needs. These are not theoretical or made up matters – they are matters of life and death and ultimately, of dignity and humanity.

Whatever your opinion about the Court's rulings – what matters more is what *we* will do about it. And the question that Jesus' disciples had to grapple with alongside him was this: how does our faith speak to our politics? How do we live out our

faith in a world where the government and people in power make decisions that do not benefit the people they are supposed to serve? This is exactly what Jesus dealt with in his day. Rome exploiting Jewish folks; taking their money and limiting their power and voice. After enslavement came exodus, after exile came homecoming – but the cycle continues. Jesus was crucified. And people are still crucified today.

So the question is timely and urgent. How *do we* live out our faith? What does it mean to be a citizen of God's kin-dom?

The fact that we live in the United States matters for what our day to day lives look like, but the fact that we are children of God and citizens of God's kin-dom matters for how we respond to where we live and what's happening around us – even in the highest Court. Faith is not private; it is public. Yes, Jesus went up to the mountain to pray, and yes he always came back down to be among the people who needed him most...the marginalized, the oppressed, the overlooked.

People say life is short, and it is. But *life is also really long* – long enough to make a

difference by how we live. What you say and do matters today – and in the future. As organizer and abolitionist Mariame Kaba said, *"hope is a discipline."* And the best way to keep the hope, she says, is to decide *"what is the next best step for me to take?"*⁶

The complexity of John's personality and the longevity of his life give us ample space to see ourselves in journey. Unlike some disciples who we only really know by their initial YES to following Jesus, we know John by a lifetime of YESes...of taking the next faithful step time and time again.

Yes to dropping his nets and following. Yes to voicing his temper and ego with his brother – boldly and brashly at times, and Yes to being corrected by Jesus when he did so. Yes to healing and witnessing new life. Yes to going up the mountain. Yes to coming back down. Yes to resting next to Jesus' heart. Yes to praying beside the grieving in the garden. Yes to showing up at the crucifixion, the hardest, most painful places in life. Yes to taking Jesus' mother in as his own. Yes to

walking into the empty tomb – even if it was a No at first. Yes to identifying Jesus publicly – *"It is the Lord!"*. Yes to writing a gospel and recording his witness of Jesus' life. Yes to serving with Peter as a missionary and evangelist. Yes to being bold and courageous in faith, even while in prison. Yes to mentoring and inspiring Paul. And **Yes** to all those moments in between these bigger moments. Faithful steps along the journey. Steps that, as John himself writes, lead to the life Jesus wants us to have – *"I came that they might have life and have it abundantly,"* (John 10:10b).

This is good news: we are created for life abundant. May the YES of our faith go beyond the first step of following Jesus and included a multitude of YESes that create a pathway to life, to justice, to hope, to the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

⁶ Jeremy Schall, "Hope Is A Discipline: Mariame Kaba On Dismantling The Carceral State," *The Intercept* (March 17, 2021), accessed on July 2, 2023 at

<https://theintercept.com/2021/03/17/intercepted-mariame-kaba-abolitionist-organizing/>.