

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge  
Sermon- John 3:22-30  
Sunday, December 17, 2017

### Sabbatical

1. First and foremost, I am sorry that I didn't do a better job of explaining that I was taking a sabbatical and why I am before now. It wasn't intentional. So much work has been done on this in vestry that it is easy to forget that the people outside of the vestry aren't aware. We are all new at this, so we learned a lot along the way. And the biggest thing we learned- and I learned specifically- is that the congregation needs to be kept more in the loop on these kinds of things. So, I apologize for not doing a good job of that.
2. The main reason why, at this point, is because it was part of the reconciliation/mediation process that we went through.
3. How it came about is that the mediator believed it was necessary just because of all the stress I went through when all of that was going on. He passed that on to the bishop, and it was decided by them that I needed to take one, not as any form of punishment, and not as a three-month vacation, but as a time to recover and refresh my spirit.
  - a. I know it seems like, "Why now? It has been a year since all of that was put to bed rest." That is true, but there are two reasons why now is the time. First, if I took a sabbatical too soon, it would look like I was somehow being punished or put on liturgical timeout. Second, it has taken the vestry and me a year to put all the details together.
4. It is important for you all to know that this isn't a time where I will be sleeping in every day until noon and then sitting on the couch eating junk food until bed time. Rest is a big part of the sabbatical, but it isn't the only part. Spiritual refreshment and renewal are important. I will be attending a church weekly (weather permitting) so that I have a chance to worship and be fed. I have also chosen the topic of prayer as a focus of study for my time away with the goal of reading widely on the topic and developing my own prayer life more deeply. I want to read books from across the Christian spectrum, not just by the theologians I usually read, so that I can really get a firmer grasp on the various traditions and complexities of prayer.
5. Finally, what can you expect when I get back? You can expect me to be recharged, full of life and vitality, and a renewed passion for serving you all and serving God with you all. In that regard, I find my return date to be more providential than coincidental. My first day back is Easter. How fitting, as I am hoping to come back with a resurrected spirit and passion for my service to the Lord.

### Fellow workers for the kingdom

1. Let me move from that and get into my message on John 3 for today. This is actually a fitting passage for the day since I had already planned on talking about my sabbatical with you all.
2. In our passage, John the Baptist's disciples come to him to tell him that Jesus is stealing his thunder by baptizing as well, and that all the people are now going to him and his disciples across the river.
  - a. It is understandable that his own disciples would be worried about John's ministry suffering because of what this other person is doing. I suspect (and indeed have experienced) that many of you, though probably not all of you, would defend me against others perceived as rival and/or a threat. But John had a very mature response that showed that he truly understood his role.
3. In verse 27 John says, John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."

- a. John the Baptist clearly understood God's sovereignty in his own plans. John received a role from heaven, but his role was limited and defined. He was the prophet who was sent before the Christ in order to prepare Israel for the Christ.
  - b. Why should John fight for prestige and disciples from another person doing ministry in the kingdom? He understood that he was given what he was given, and others were given what they were given. So, there was no need for jealousy and infighting.
  - c. But he knew even more. John knew that Jesus was the very Christ for whom he had come to herald. Why would he ever try to compete with the Son of God when his primary role was to point others to the Son?
4. I need to understand these points as well as I prepare to be away from you all whom I love dearly for three months. There will be others doing the work of the kingdom in my place. There will be four different preachers, each taking one Sunday a month, with one of them being another priest. There will be those handling pastoral care, Wednesday evening events, lent services, and Holy Week.
- a. Among my favorite things to do is to preach and to go through the Wednesday lent services. It is hard to have someone else doing it instead of me. Yet I also have to understand that God is the one leading New Life, not me. God is the one developing and discipling people, preaching words to their heads and hearts, and providing them with opportunities to learn and grow deeper in the faith. The success of those things doesn't count on me, because it is all about God. A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.

I must decrease, he must increase

1. Moving back to John the Baptist, I love his words that end our passage. "He must increase, but I must decrease." What a powerful and mature way of understanding his own role. He was in a unique situation as he came to point others to one that had yet to come. Once Jesus came, John wasn't needed anymore. He had fulfilled his task as prophet.
2. It isn't really any different for us, though, is it? My ministry isn't mine. It isn't about me. In a perfect world, I would be invisible (and my ego would be ok with that), and God is all you would experience in a worship service. Your ministry isn't about you, either. Many of you have things you do, from service to others in a one on one manner, to mentoring, to discipleship, to leading studies, to prayer, and so on. It is important to always remember that we aren't gathering people to ourselves, but pointing them to the Father, and to his Son, our savior.
3. It's hard, isn't it? Hard to allow yourself to be vulnerable and invisible. We can get frustrated because another church is doing something that attracts people away from us. We might get upset that someone leaves one of our ministries to make time for another ministry within this church.
  - a. The musical Chicago has a great song, *Cellophane Man*, about a guy that no one ever seemed to notice. That should be our goal. Not that what we do goes unnoticed, but that people don't see us, they see God; and that we are willing to be like cellophane, invisible, as we humbly serve our God and our Lord. We must decrease. I must decrease. He must increase.