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## *Competition and Collegiality: I am not the Messiah*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Advent 3 – Year B**

*“This is the testimony given by John when they sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah’” (John 1:19-20).*

Before there was Tech versus Georgia. Before there was Alabama against Auburn, or South Carolina versus Clemson, Ole Miss and Mississippi State, Army-Navy – before those old and storied rivalries, there has always been competition.

We seem to have been born into it, especially those of us growing up in a family of siblings or close cousins. Competition, and how we live with those who want the same thing as we do, is part of what forms our identities. (Has anyone here ever heard of René Girard?)

Indeed, in the Holy Bible itself, some of the most the critical and life-changing events occur around moments of competition. Consider the first brothers, Cain and Abel, competing for God’s favor in their individual sacrifices. Consider Esau and Jacob, both wanting their father’s blessing. Consider Mary and Martha, two very different sisters.

And consider this fellow who shows up every year about this time, John the Baptist. Just as college football season is closing and many yearly rivalries have been settled, John the Baptist shows up. He shows up in order to teach us something about competition.

Competition? Who was the competitor of John the Baptist? Who was his rival? Well, it was Jesus! (“Jesus” is always the right answer to every Sunday School question!).

John the Baptist is the only character who shows up in the opening chapters of each of the four gospels. Not Joseph, not the shepherds, not the magi, not even Mary. If we review the ways in which John the Baptist is mentioned, we might just learn something about competition in these weeks before Christmas. It seems that, before Jesus came around, the role of “leading prophet and teacher,” and maybe even the role of “messiah,” belonged to John the Baptist.

It was to John the Baptist that people were flocking out from Jerusalem, to witness to him at the Jordan River. And before Jesus had disciples, John the Baptist had them. In fact, it looks like the first disciples of Jesus were originally disciples of John the Baptist. When they saw Jesus, it seems they switched teams in the middle of the season!

Even after Jesus had begun his ministry, John the Baptist continued his own baptizing and preaching; and John the Baptist still had disciples. Apparently, one day some of John’s disciples came to John and said, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” (John 3:26). Yes, John’s disciples were complaining because more people were going to Jesus than to John. The polls show! More people are now flocking to Jesus! What should we do?

Then, in all his eccentricity, in all his strange dress and inflammatory words, John the Baptist actually gives the right answer to his disciples. He says, quite clearly, “I am not the one. I am not the Messiah.” His words should be a constant reminder for anyone these days, for anyone who receives adulation and attention from people. No matter how much

attention you get, remember the words of John the Baptist, “I—that is, You—are not the Messiah.”

Then, apparently, John the Baptist says even more. As he confides to his own attentive and adoring disciples, he says, “Jesus must increase, but I must decrease.” He is the light, not me. This is the reason we keep the Feast of Christmas near the winter solstice when the days are at their shortest. As Jesus is born into the world, days begin to grow longer, and light increases in the world. The Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist is kept on June 25, near the summer solstice, exactly half a year before Christmas, because the days begin to get shorter after that; light decreases. (This is also why the Gospel of Luke has John the Baptist’s mother getting pregnant six months before the pregnancy of her relative, Mary).

It must have been hard for John the Baptist to defer to someone else. But look at that honorable dance that both John and Jesus perform, when Jesus came out to be baptized by John. “I should be baptized by you,” said John. “No,” said Jesus, “I am to be baptized by you, John.” They defer to each other.

Their mutual behavior is exactly the sort of thing we need during this season. Yes, this is the season when we are thrust into family gatherings again. This is the season when we replay the same old competition tapes. Why am I competing with my sister again this year? I thought we were over that.

We are never over it.

The behavior of John the Baptist teaches us this season, “I am not the Messiah. I want to think that the world revolves around me, that the party will not begin until I show up, that my present will be the finest, that my job will bring in the most money for the firm this year. But, I am not the Messiah.”

Yes, John the Baptist and Jesus were close. Scripture identifies them as cousins. They were probably friends. But they were also competitors. Sometimes, our closest competitors are also our closest friends. They may even be our brothers and sisters. This is why Jesus will say, later, about John: “Among those born of women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist.”

Ultimately, the word “compete” means to “strive with” another person, not against them. The word is not “Antipete,” to “strive against.” The word is “compete,” “to strive with.” We strive with other people for good skill and for good football. And also for good government, for good families, for the common good.

Yes, our competitors are often the very people we have the most in common with. Common blood, common family ties, common jobs, common hopes. Tech and Georgia. Tennessee and Vanderbilt, Duke and North Carolina. Army and Navy. Wow, maybe even Republican and Democrat. We share our very lives together with them. True competitors are really our true colleagues. The great witness of John the Baptist this year is to show us how to live with competition. How to strive with each other for the common kingdom of God. By deferring to each other. By honoring each other. By loving each other.

By realizing, over and over again, “Hey, I am not the greatest. I am not the greatest. I am not the Messiah.”

AMEN.

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