

A Monopoly or a Franchise?
by the Rev. Dr. Gay Lee Einstein
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John 1:29-42

Twelve years ago, my family decided to take a two week tour of Italy and Greece. Rather than rent a car and have to hassle with navigating in foreign lands, we signed on with a thirty five member tour group. We made our way by bus from Northern Italy to Southern Italy stopping in Venice, Florence Assisi and Rome, and then, after a short flight, we continued our tour in Athens.

One of our unplanned stops was in Ravenna. We had been traveling for awhile, so our tour guide, Rita, asked the driver to stop at a roadside gas-station/restaurant so that both we and the bus could refuel. As we exited the bus, Rita waved toward a plain looking octagonal building not too distant from our rest stop. She said, "Well, this isn't on the tour, but it's an interesting building. A baptistery. You might enjoy it." Everyone else, like lemmings, I thought then, headed for the food and bathrooms. Off I went, alone, a pilgrim on personal pilgrimage, wanting to explore this "interesting building—a baptistery."

It wasn't much to look at on the outside. The cathedrals I was used to even on this first leg of our trip--were of gleaming white marble, with gold inlaid doors. Statues of the saints were often carved into the exterior walls. Not so, this baptistery. This building was of simple brick—no gold, no carvings. But inside! Many of the interiors of Renaissance Cathedrals are so ornate that they can be overwhelming; and the stained glass and smallish windows can make a cathedral seem dark and muggy. Some might claim that the ambiance is calm and reverential, but it can also seem forboding—or as my daughters sometimes complained on our trip, "Mom, this church is creepy."

With clear glass windows, this baptistery was full of light. AND, like the outside, the inside, too was singular in its simplicity--plain interior walls no statues. But what really made this baptistery special was the great mosaic on its domed ceiling. It is of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River. What brilliant color! The light from the windows bounced off the ceiling tiles and made the whole thing glisten, as if the water was not an artistic rendering at all, but the real thing. It was one of the most memorable sights of my trip, probably made so in part by the fact that I had discovered it by myself, well, sort of. Of course, I bought several postcards of the place, and I vowed that when I returned to The States I would find out more about this unique building.

As it turns out, the baptistery is actually THE earliest Christian building we visited while we were in Italy. It was built in the 500's. It dates from the Byzantine era, when mosaic was all the rage. What is really interesting about **this** mosaic, and the reason I wanted you to see it today, is that it is of John baptizing Jesus, which fits right in with our scripture passage for today, but it is of John baptizing Jesus with a twist. On one side of Jesus is John the Baptist, but on the other side of Jesus is a figure that maybe you thought was God. Actually though, it is not OUR God. It is one of a number of **pagan** Gods. See the brown bag behind him? That is the give away. According to an art history book I consulted, he is the "personalisation" of the pagan god of the Jordan. In the 500's in Ravenna, it seems, paganism had not completely died out. It existed side by side with Christianity—two streams of religion, informing and influencing one another until Christianity finally won out. We tend to think that Christianity was THE one religion of the Western world back before secularism, hit Europe and also the influx of Muslims. But that is definitely not the case.

I want you to keep that in mind as we study our scripture passage for today. We'll come back to it in a minute. Before we can dig into today's passage, though, I need to give you a little background information. Remember, John the Baptist's ministry began after Rome had taken over Judah. It was Rome's practice, when it took over a region, to pay local authorities to keep the peace. The temple authorities, then, were actually in Rome's employ. "Keep the peace," said Rome to Jerusalem's religious and government officials, "And we will reward you with some of the vast lands we have confiscated." As you might imagine, many of the Jews felt betrayed and disillusioned. Their priests were turncoats, or Empire lackeys. Consequently, the Jews were on the lookout for new leaders and a new place to worship. Where might they go?

The answer was, "To the Jordan." Word had it that a strange man, a sort of latter day Elijah, was preaching and washing away sins. People came in droves wanting to hold on to SOME religion that wasn't dictated to them by the Empire. They gave up animal sacrifice and were baptized instead. John became their new priest.

John even baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, according to the other gospel narratives. In this scripture version though, John doesn't baptize Jesus. Jesus turns up in the crowd at the river, and John points him out to everyone as "the one I said would come after me; the one who is greater than I am." Jesus returns the next day and John says the same thing. That is enough for two of John's disciples to jump ship, or jump John's ministry, anyway, and join Jesus' ministry.. I'm really going to show my age now,

but do you remember the television show, *Laugh-In*? Remember the Fickle Finger of Fate award. That week, it went to Andrew and Peter!

This little incident gives us a lot of clues about the religious world into which Jesus came preaching and teaching his message of peace and love. In Judah there was already a vibrant non-temple ministry, and it was led by John the Baptist. Jesus' ministry was similar to John's, although as far as we know, Jesus didn't baptize, and he was more of a teacher than a preacher.

Jesus ministry must have created some confusion among Jews. They were hungry for a religion that didn't have Roman overtones. "But which one do we follow?" they asked scratching their heads, confused and perplexed. "Do we follow John or Jesus?" It is likely that Jesus' ministry also created some competition for John. As we read today, some of John's disciples, actually joined Jesus' movement. Was John really happy about that as the scripture seems to imply? If you read on in the book of John, you'll see that every time John the Baptist is mentioned, he is dissing his own ministry and pointing to Jesus. You know the line in *Hamlet*, "The lady doth protest too much?" It is thought that perhaps the man, John the Baptist, doth protest too much! The author of this gospel, written 60 years after Jesus' death, may be trying to convince hangers-on to John's ministry that Jesus, not John, is the one to follow. Jesus, not John, is the Messiah.

Just as we learn from the mosaic in Ravenna that there were two strands of religion in Eastern Italy, one pagan and one Christian, in Jesus day, there were two strands and probably more, of anti-temple-ism, for lack of a better word. It would take some time for all of the different anti-temple religious movements to shakeout. What was it about Jesus' ministry that made it stick? Why didn't it just go the way of other movements, including John's? The theologian John Crossan offers a compelling answer. He says that John had a monopoly, but Jesus had a franchise." That's may be a crude way of putting it, as if Jesus' disciples wore paper hats and sold burgers and fries. Yet, there is truth in what he says, I think. To get baptized, you went only to John. John's ministry was about John. Stopping John's movement meant only stopping John. Jesus' ministry went beyond Jesus to the kingdom he was at that very moment creating on earth. Jesus did not go about the business of creating that kingdom alone, but WITH his disciples—or his franchisees. Jesus was definitely thinking ahead. "Come see," says Jesus in our passage for today. Don't just listen to me. Be part of it. Live it. Practice it. Heal, preach, teach in God's name, just like me. And it all paid off. When Jesus was executed, his disciples carried on in his name.

You know that arcade game, Whack a groundhog? You take a club and when a groundhog pops up out of a hole, you whack it, but then another pops up from a different hole. The idea is that you whack as many groundhogs as possible in a short time frame. I've only played "Whack a Groundhog" a couple of times—both times the groundhogs won. That must have been what it was like for Rome when it encountered the Christian movement. Whack one Christian disciple, and another pops up somewhere else! You just can't stop them, they're everywhere!

And that brings us to us. What is this text telling us? I am thinking that just as in Ravenna and just as in Jesus' day-- there are a lot of competing religions in the US, and even right here in the Charlottesville area. Pluralism is good, but I sometimes fear that Christianity has been so influenced by secularism—which is a kind of religion I suppose, that Christianity really isn't Christian anymore. We might play with the idea a little. Think if all of us got together and created a mosaic for Cove's ceiling. We would have John and Jesus, but who or what would be the other figure in that mosaic representative of Christian faith today? It wouldn't be the pagan god of the Jordan, but would it be our God—or someone or something else?

Every year, my daughters' elementary school hosted a Winter Celebration—which celebrated the pluralism represented at the school. The walls were decorated with menorahs and Stars of David. African Americans were encouraged to wear traditional costumes in celebration of Kwanzaa. But you know what symbols the powers that be at that school determined were representative of the Christian faith? Candy canes, and Santa Clauses. And when, for the Winter Celebration Feast, a friend of mine brought in little paper napkins with the manger scene on them, she was told that they were inappropriate. They were replaced by little napkins with red poinsettias. In this pluralistic world, Christianity, and by that, I do not mean the secularized version of it, is underrepresented, or not at all. Maybe in our ceiling mosaic, then, you'd have Jesus, John and Santa Claus, I don't know.

As you may have read in this week's newsletter, the Session is planning a church-wide retreat after worship on Palm Sunday, March 16th, to discuss next steps for Cove Church. The hope is that we will discuss Cove's future, which will include the future of the Church, with a capital "C." I hope that we will spend some time thinking about our role as Christians, and how we intend to go about imparting our faith to coming generations. For sure the Christian Church is in need of some more franchisees. There are a lot of competing religions, and movements and even Gods out there. How are we going to make sure that our Christian religion sticks? Give it some thought. For you as for me. Amen

