

December 13, 2020 Sermon
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Who are you? What do you say about yourself? What do you want OTHERS to say about you? In this day of so many ads for so many things everywhere we look, *how* would you brand yourself?

Early on in the pandemic, marketing experts were, in my opinion, hot on the trail of, and taking advantage of everyone that was following the wishes of the higher ups to stay home. When we are at our lowest points in life, when we are dying to get out into the world and see people and things, we are more susceptible to being caught up in the world of ordering online. And maybe I should speak for me alone.

At any rate, there was a certain time period early on, when I would be on a social media site and a company from Italy was pushing their handbags. They. Were. Lovely. They came in all shapes and sizes. One could be ordered in *any* color imaginable, and they were also posted with a view of the inside of the bag so as to see the many and varied compartments.

I have friends who have visited Italy, and come back with some pretty amazing leather handbags, and although the price didn't match that of what Walmart could probably offer, I decided I should *have* one of those bags. So, I ordered one.

It was to be in Robin's egg blue with a tan handle. The lining was a satin navy blue, and there was a large zippered compartment in the center. The purse was also touted as having the brand name emblazoned in a very small spot toward the bottom of the purse. This last part didn't matter to me because it wasn't a company I'd ever heard of before, and even though I do, I'm really not a fan of carrying things that shout out from whence they came.

When I ordered, the typical caveat appeared on the screen that, due to Covid, shipping may take an unusually longer amount of time than normal. So, I waited. I waited some more. I waited some more. Then I realized I had not even received as much as a tracking number to follow the progress. Still, I was pretty excited at the thought of receiving a real Italian leather handbag!

(And really, what's the difference between Italian leather and leather from here? The cowhide should be the same on all animals, but here we are.)

The day came when it finally arrived and I was beside myself with glee! I tore open the box, and at the same moment the beauty of the robin's egg blue caught my eye, the wonderful aroma of leather hit my nose! It was a sight to behold!

Then. I opened the handbag. It wasn't finished. The lining had never been sewn to the inside, so the raggedy side of the leather was showing. Because of this, it was difficult to zip the handbag closed, and even more difficult to get inside the inner pocket. It was all just kind of laying there. And here's the kicker...there was *no* invoice inside the box, (and even better, no logo stamped on the outside of the purse) and when I tried to find the company online, there was no trace of them. I had been duped!

Now some would say that at least I got my product, and they would be correct. I *did* get a product, but what was *said* about it and what I *received* were two different things. Who *are* you? What do you want *others* to say about you?

Are you someone who gives others the impression that you are a beautiful, well-made, leather handbag, only to find that you're not that person? OR are you a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of person, because it's super easy to be someone you're *not*, these days. Social media makes it really easy for us to be a *different* kind of person when we don't have to talk to anyone face to face.

John didn't have the luxury of social media, and, in today's gospel lesson, he didn't *tell* people who he *was*. He didn't try to paint some big beautiful glossy picture of himself. Instead, he told people who he *wasn't*!

Priests and Levites had been sent by the Jews to find out who this man was. When they asked John, he said to them, "I am NOT the Messiah." "Well, what then?" They wanted to know. "Are you *Elijah*? Maybe a *prophet*?" John answered no, and they *insisted* that he tell them who he *really* was so they would have an answer for those who sent them to him. So, John says, "*I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*"

John was sent by God to testify...to be a witness to the light, to tell people of the coming of God in Christ. He was sent by God to tell people about the good news of the one that was to come. John was sent to be a straight-forward, what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of person. He was sent to let people know that Jesus, the Son of God, God in flesh, the light of the world, was about to come and be with them in person.

John was a witness. A believer. A man sent to let people know the truth about the light of the world. And so, he speaks the words of the prophet Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." John was sent to let others know that the light of Christ shines, regardless of the darkness. John was sent to let others know that God was entering into this world in the form of Jesus, a human being that could walk beside us, and be *our* light in the darkness.

We, too, are to be witnesses, or if you'd rather, disciples. We are here to share in the joy and spread the light of Christ to others, even in the *darkest* of days. And we've been through some pretty dark days, lately.

You might wonder how we can witness to others if we're not meeting together, but witnessing, being a disciple, means we *talk* to those who are OUTSIDE the building, or we conduct ourselves in ways that speak to others without speaking. Maybe we should use this time to get the word out in the *open* that no matter *what* happens, we are *still* believers in *the light*.

Statistics have shown that it is possible there are many more people tuning in to the word of God now, than ever before, because they have social media at their fingertips. We now know that families from far away are tuning in to listen to their home church services. Friends are downloading sermons and reading them with their morning coffee. Covid *still* rages, and the *light still* shines.

Dolly Parton had a Christmas special on television one evening, and even though she is all glitz and glimmer, she is as much a bearer of the light as *any* preacher. We got to hear about her childhood, about her family life, about how she grew up poor, and how God was the central part of the family as she grew up. We were treated to the songs that she wrote because of *Christ's light* shining in her life.

The light of *Christ* shines, *regardless* of the darkness.

There is a news program that I allow myself to watch every afternoon because at the end, there is a segment called "Lives Well Lived." They showcase people who have died of Covid. Not only does it make the virus real, but it tells us who these people are...what they did for their community and how they let the light of Christ shine in the darkness for others.

People from *all* walks of life. From young children to the older generations. They talk about those who were as healthy as could be, as well as those who were prime for the virus. These were people who worked hard as teachers, or as frontline hospital workers; children who brought hope and happiness to their grandparents' eyes.

Men and women who lived paycheck to paycheck, families that lost first a mother and then a father, and we got to hear about how other family members or members of the community stepped in to help take care of those who were left behind.

The light of *Christ* shines, *regardless* of the darkness.

And so, I ask again. *Who* are you? Are you that purse that makes people think you're worth paying a hefty price and waiting months and months to receive, only to find that the inside is rough and empty? Or are *you* that person who is able to tell people who you *are* by telling them who you *are not*? Are you able to *speak* to people about the *light* of Christ in a *believable* way without *words*, because you've lived your life in a way that makes people stop and take notice without any special marketing required? No stamp, or logo somewhere on the outside?

Whoever you *are*, *remember* that the light of Christ *shines, regardless* of the darkness. *Whoever* you are, God in Christ will walk beside you, shining the light on the things that matter in life, even when the darkness threatens to take over.

"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."

May the light of Christ be a beacon for you all in the days ahead, no matter *how* dark the days may seem. Amen.