

It was a terse exchange between Jesus and his cohort, John the Baptist. Though the two men had very different personalities and approaches to life, they had deep respect for each other. True, they expressed and lived their faith very differently, but they shared the same values and concerns.

John had invested his life in being a traditional prophet, an old-style “holy man.” He was, then, an outspoken, joyless, abrasive, fiery gadfly, always agitating, rabble-rousing, and doing his best to draw attention to the controversial social issues and political ills of the country. He was good at it. He became a real “burr in the saddle” of the country’s power brokers.

He lived off the land; lived the lonely, wilderness life of a hermit, literally subsisting on a diet of grasshoppers and honey and dressed in animal skins. Many people secretly admired John – his courage and candor, but understandably, they did their admiring from a distance. He just wasn’t the kind of person one would seek out for companionship or invite to dinner or send an invitation to one’s daughter’s wedding. (The name of his cologne was “Twelve Days on a Troop Train.”)

So outspoken did he become that, not surprisingly, for criticizing the morals of the provincial governor, Herod, he landed in prison. It was very unlikely that he would get out alive. (In fact, he didn’t. If you recall the story, he was beheaded as part of the entertainment at a palace party – one of many people who, right up to the present, have lost their heads at wild parties.

The idea of dying, though, didn’t depress John nearly as much as the possibility that everything that he had done, all he had stood for, everything he had proclaimed and had risked, would evaporate at his death, that it would be lost and forgotten.

His hope was that, if and when he were executed or met some other untimely death, that Jesus would pick up where he left off – not only “pick up,” but that he would turn out to be the promised “Messiah” who would take over and even more than had he, call down God’s wrath and judgment on the blatant evil of the time. If John could count upon that happening, he could accept death with complete serenity. Life hadn’t been much fun for him, anyhow.

That, then, is why the reports about Jesus that were trickling back to John were disappointing and disturbing. Far from Jesus living the sparse, ascetic lifestyle of John, Jesus was actually reported to have taken evening boat rides on the Sea of Galilee with his dozen close friends. And it wasn’t just the boat rides. The fact seemed to be, Jesus had too many friends, far more friends and groupies than John believed that a prophet ought to have. It was reported to John that Jesus accepted invitations to weddings and dinner parties. It was said that he made wine for one of the weddings.

He attracted huge crowds for his mountainside, teaching sessions and, worse yet, he FED them on at least two occasions. He spent far too much time healing and comforting people rather than challenging, confronting, and correcting them.

What it boiled down to was that Jesus was popular, and to John, popularity was synonymous with compromised integrity.

That was why, in exasperation, John finally fires off a message to Jesus which says, in effect, “Jesus, if, in fact, you are the one sent by God, then shouldn’t you start acting like it? When can I expect to see some sparks fly, to hear of some substantive confrontations and challenges of the powers that be? Where are the warnings and judgments that so need to be pronounced? Jesus, are you going to be “The One,” or do we have to look for another?”

We aren’t told of Jesus’ initial reaction to that terse inquiry by John, but I know myself and my own insecurities enough to know that, had I been in Jesus’ sandals that day, and confronted with the obvious disappointment and irritation of someone of John’s stature, I would have been undone. I would have gone into a flurry of trying to defend myself, of trying to interpret what I had been doing as being consistent with John’s expectation, and falling all over myself in apologizing for not having lived up to John’s expectations.

Jesus, however, didn’t cringe. What he said, in effect, was “Go back, and tell John what’s going on here. People who have been blind are beginning to see. People who haven’t been able to hear now do. The dead are coming to life. The poor are infused with hope. And tell John that he’ll be happier if he doesn’t let people know what I’m doing and the way I’m doing it, get in the way for him”

That’s difficult for most of us to do, though. How does one keep one’s wits about him when confronted with disappointment, disapproval and even resentment of someone he admires, someone whose opinion he values and/or who he thinks of as a real soul mate. In this case, the question with which he was hit was: “Jesus, are you going to fulfill the hopes that we have for you or what?”

Perhaps in yours or my experience, it might begin with: “I would think that a loving wife would try to ...” “As one who says he’s a Christian, how can you not...?” “As a patriotic, American citizen, don’t you have a duty to...?” “What kind of daughter would refuse to...?” “I certainly would have thought that a loyal Democrat would get behind...” “Doesn’t it concern you as a parent that...?” “You know that I almost never ask anything of you so I naturally expected that when it came to this...”

That kind of battering leads to the moral intimidation of an awfully lot of people. To make matters worse, often the battering comes from within us rather than from another person. Jesus, for example, even without any accusation from John, might, on his own, have long been haunted with worry that John probably disapproved of his way of doing things, seen him as shallow or as lacking moral

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substance. Just our imaginings of what someone else is probably thinking, can leave us very uncertain and insecure.

That wasn't so in the case of Jesus. Jesus seemed to have no problem making clear to John that he didn't need or seek John's validation for who he was or what he did. That was inspiring and heartening.

But if you examine it carefully, for many, if not most of us, there ARE certain voices, certain personalities, certain strong influences that have this unofficial, unacknowledged kind of veto power over the way we approach our living and how confident and secure we are.

In Jesus' struggle with temptations at the beginning of his ministry, Satan is described as using a form of this in goading and inveigling him. In the one temptation, Satan uses the Bible itself to try to get Jesus to second-guess himself. He says, in effect, "Jesus, wouldn't a real son of God demonstrate his faith and witness to it by doing marvelous things, like, for example, jumping from the pinnacle of the temple and letting angels rescue you?"

That didn't work, but frequently it does work. When a reasonable, sensitive person who has a strong sense of responsibility and duty, who is respectful, and who has a desire to please, is made to feel that he has seriously violated the expectations of someone about whom he cares, has become a disappointment to them, it can leave one cringing with self-doubt.

Never mind the fact that only a little while ago, what you were doing and the way you were doing it, the purposes that were motivating you, the priorities at which you had arrived, had felt right and good, and had seemed to make sense of your abilities and strengths. Now, though, because of just the right comment from just the right source, or maybe it's only a raised eyebrow, or perhaps it's no more than an obvious silence, but because it comes from where it does, self-confidence is turned into self-doubt.

"How can I possibly be right about what I'm doing if it's so disappointing to my own mother? How do I know that I haven't gone off on some wild goose chase, some irrelevant tangent by which I'm losing everyone's respect and confidence? It was undoubtedly stupid of me not to defer to the common sense of the many people who are wiser than I am."

WRONG! He, you, I, DO have a choice. Not only is that implicit in this incident of Jesus refusing to cringe in the face of John's trying to impose his expectations upon Jesus: that freedom is implicit throughout the Christian Gospel. If you read carefully, you'll discover that Jesus was constantly disappointing people -- felt free NOT to fulfill their expectations of him. He sometimes disappointed the disciples, disappointed some of the people who came seeking his help, violated the expectations of the religious authorities, and even ignored the expectations of his own mother.

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What becomes clear, then, is that Jesus never intended to create a kind of religious machinery wherein having shoved people into one end, they come out the other end as nice carbon copies of Jesus and of each other, all with identical spiritual styles, talking the same kinds of God-talk and other religious noises, all with the same consciences, all aspiring to the same ideals, and all acting upon their faith in the same ways.

Much to the contrary, (as Jesus made clear in his message back to John), as much as Jesus believed that he (Jesus) needed to be more political and less social, more confrontative and less a “good buddy,” more of a surgeon and less a teacher, but to Jesus, that was John’s issue, not his. And John needed to recognize that, or he was going to waste a lot of time and emotion being disappointed.

This is a very important matter to understand, one which easily gets lost in the milieu of organized religion – particularly authoritarian fundamentalist religion.

NO ONE, not even the most inspiring “John-the-Baptist-type figure in your life,” is allowed to have veto power over your sense of at-homeness as a son or daughter of God. Nor is anyone permitted to second guess or to grant final approval to the kind of spirituality that God has ignited and channeled through your particular life. You don’t have to defend or justify the way you give or forgive or speak out or oppose or support or improvise or innovate or change. That’s between you and God.

If it turns out, then, that there ARE voices and presences around you, that are able, with only a word or two, a look, a sigh of exasperation, that cause you to cringe or to tiptoe or become disoriented with self-doubt, it almost certainly means that you have allowed them inappropriate power in your life, and you do need to take it back (whatever that means in your case).

And it isn’t that we should make ourselves oblivious to the concerns and feelings of those we love, admire, and respect. There is much to be learned from others. We should and we will do all kinds of things that please them, that are gratifying them, and that convey respect or affection. The vital point is that whatever your response to their opinions, their hopes and expectations, it’s not commanded or imposed upon you. Whatever that is good and Godly that becomes of you, is between you and God, is a freely embraced choice.

And yes, we won’t always get everything right. We’ll still get some of what we do and the way we are, wrong some of the time. We may have some “I-told-you-sos” inflicted upon us from time to time. We’ll inevitably still require a certain amount of forgiveness. But when so, it will have to do with yours and my own choices and errors, our own forgiveness and God’s, and our own kinds of recovery and rebirth.

That's the way God intended it to be with us. And, as Jesus said (loosely translated) at the end of his return message to John, "Once you understand and take hold of it that way, John, you'll be a whole lot happier."