

*John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals.*

I can think of no better poster child for doing God's work, no matter what anyone might think of you, than John the Baptist.

He is described as having clothes made of camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist, and eating locusts and honey.

His clothes were coarse and rugged, symbolizing a departure from the soft garments of the wealthy ruling class, and communicating an important tie to the prophet Elijah. Jesus himself would later solidify John's role as prophet, as told to us by Matthew:

*As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.*

His diet boldly symbolized a commitment to living off the land, relying on God's provision while keeping kosher, and as David Capes, former Dean of Theological Studies at Wheaton College points out, perhaps, also a prophetic symbol of judgement and blessing, in the tradition of Jeremiah and Ezeikel, with the locusts representing the fate of those behaving badly, and the honey reminding us that when the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, the Promised Land was nothing less than flowing with milk and honey.

While you might imagine people to be just a little bit fearful of this towering figure, dirty and unkempt, beard sticky with honey and no doubt a few errant locust parts, wildly preaching his belief in a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, They didn't turn away from him in fear. They followed him, in ever increasing numbers.

Sometimes faith knows.

Take a moment. Think about a time when you have been so steadfast in your faith, in doing the work of God, in promoting salvation that absolutely nothing else mattered, certainly not what people might think. Note that I said the work of God, not the work of the church. Your moment may have taken place miles away from the world of formal religion. In this room, there are firefighters and first responders, people who have risked their very existence to save others from peril. In this room are people who have accepted the potential for their own imprisonment to get others across a border to safety. In this room are people, at least one person, who describe their FBI file as a source of pride. In this room are people who have faced the doom and despair of their own addictions, stood up and said, "not me, not today". What is the moment in which you lived into Christ's work so much that nothing else mattered? Think about it... and believe that God's response to you would be nothing less than "you are my child, and in you, I am so well pleased".

Acts of salvation and redemption can be hard to talk about, though, in the context of faith. In this third least-religious state in the country, it can feel so much safer to hide our spiritual journeys behind a cloak of

modest secular anonymity. “Ah, you know. It’s just the right thing to do”. The results of doing the opposite might be surprising though...they certainly have been for me.

Try telling a world of people who have ever only known you as an educator, or by connections firmly rooted in the secular world that you’ve decided to pursue a call to ministry, take a giant pay cut, and commit to theological education along the way, taking responsibility for the spiritual well-being of an ever-growing congregation in the meantime. Easy, right?

I’ll tell you how I dealt with it...for a good while, I just didn’t. I figured that some of the hardest conversations and harshest judgement would come from longtime friends, and colleagues in the world of education, so for the longest time, long after our September congregational vote, I didn’t tell anyone outside of my family or this family. Finally, when I could no longer hide from people that in just over a month, I wouldn’t be their colleague any longer, I very hesitantly explained myself via an all-school email, shuddering at what the response would be.

From the most cynical school counselor I know: “This strikes me as very much on-brand for you. You’ve followed your gut as long as I’ve known you, and your faith has always informed your choices. Best of luck in this new adventure.”

From one of the least religious teachers I know: “That sounds like an amazing opportunity and a wonderful shift that provides your continued leadership in a new and exciting way. Also, amusing that Nancy is kind of your boss again”.

From the sales rep for our precision machining equipment: “I also just became a licensed minister last summer. I do a lot of volunteering and trying to discern the direction God wants me to go now. I will be praying for you and your ministry!”

Ok, so educators are nice people by nature. Let’s try people who had no idea at all this would be coming. On December 18th, I finally had the courage to post it on Facebook:

Of the 37 comments (and I am not the kind of person to have a social media life that inspires 37 people to comment on anything), not a single one was critical. Instead:

From the person who bullied me horrifically in Elementary School, “Incredible”.

From my father’s former business partner: Congratulations!! Following your heart is the best way through Life's journey because it is never a straight line.

From a diamond merchant in Houston who I spoke up for during a time of injustice in high school and haven’t seen since we were both 16, “I come from a long line of ministers and know God ordained and called you at birth and you have been serving the kingdom ever since! How thrilling for you to finally discover what God always knew.”

OK fine. Teachers are nice, and social media is putting our best foot forward. Still not believing it, I waited until just last week to tell the other 15 tech center directors state-wide. If anyone is going to be dismissive about a call to faith, perhaps this is the group?

From a director in the Upper Valley: “Finding faith leaders these days isn’t easy, and it’s also not easy to fight diminished church attendance as a national trend, but faith is such a vital part of a full life, so thank you for stepping up to heed the call”.

From a director in Central Vermont: It can’t be easy to make this decision mid school year, and I know from what you shared that your conviction is strong, and you are doing the right thing.

From a director in the Bradford area: Why haven’t we talked about this before? I pursued ministry in a former life, and still fill in as a part-time pastor here and there. Good for you...let’s stay connected!

Friends, not a single critical or cynical response to proclaiming a new life, centered on faith, here in Central Vermont. It wasn’t something to hide, it was something to celebrate.

Maybe there’s nothing to lose about being upfront about the truth as we live it, and lots more to gain.

My call to us all is to be like John. Be proud and be strong about accepting the cost of following Jesus in your daily work and life.

You never know when, in doing the good work that honors the Messiah, you might just find him in the crowd, walking amongst us all in a world of systemic sin, seeking out your help just as he allowed John to baptize him in his own name, reminding us of just what it means to be beloved.