

Sunday, December 11, 2011: John 1:6-8, 19-28

by [Bill Goettler](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

These are days of harsh political rhetoric. Political factions insist not only on the goodness of their own ideas but also on the dramatic failure of their opponents' ideas. We might be in Advent, but this is no season for understanding or for mutual forbearance in our civil discourse.

The Christian church doesn't do much better than the rest of the culture. We would rather be divided than find the common space and faith that would unite us. Insistent as we are about the rectitude of our own ways, we hardly offer the world a model for reconciliation. Perhaps we are simply following the political models of our times—or perhaps we are finally getting what we thought we wanted: a culture in which the church is leading the way.

I teach and engage students who are preparing for ministry—some in the faith traditions in which they have been raised, some in traditions that are new to them, and some who insist that they belong to no tradition at all.

Almost all of these students are profoundly uninterested in denominational battles, in the self-justifying proclamations of divisive voices, each claiming to honor the church. Every day these students worship, sing and pray, eat and study together. They are certainly not of one mind—not about biblical scholarship, not about theology and not even about the practice of ministry. The lines of difference—philosophical, political and theological—are just as present within the walls of the divinity school as they are among the Christians in our churches. There is no reluctance to debate, to have at it about anything and everything. The students who are firmly embedded in dozens of different denominations celebrate their traditions with gusto. They are also quite willing to offer severe critiques of their own traditions.

But somehow even the deepest ideological disagreements fail to break relationships. Somehow there is an ongoing sense that the Christian faith that has moved them this far binds them together in their similarities and in their differences. It's much more interesting to them to understand why other faithful people disagree on the

questions that face us, from same-gender marriage to the meaning of salvation, than it is to turn their backs on those people with whom they differ. After engaging in the kind of debate that would cause most seasoned clergy to head for the exit door, the students go outside and kick a soccer ball or make plans to continue their conversation over a couple of beers. I listen in as they dream about the churches that they long to serve, the light of Jesus Christ that they hope to share. They seem to know that there are very different kinds of Christian communities awaiting their leadership. All of the possibilities seem full of promise—and somehow they know that the light of Jesus Christ promises to shine all the more brightly through those differences.

When did so many of us in the Christian church lose our clarity about God's ways of being known? How is it that we've become such a battleground that even those seeking election in partisan politics back away at the church's incivility and downright meanness?

John the Baptist was sent from God and came as a witness to testify to the light. He wasn't concerned about his own agenda, although clearly he knew what he believed to be right and what he believed to be wrong. John was more concerned with making sure that those who came his way would recognize that the light of God was coming into the world. When people wanted to sign on to his cause he turned them away. He was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John the Baptist is most troubling to those who imagine that they alone are the rightful bearers of the light. That is why he offers such a compelling witness to divinity school students, and to the many faithful Christians in the world who understand that the struggles and disagreements of the present day, while legitimate expressions of varied faith perspectives, cannot define the inviting, illuminating light of Jesus Christ.

How are we treating those who find John's prophetic words to be compelling? Are we wearing them down, exhausting the visionary leaders who care more about the coming of light than about denominational and theological struggles? Institutional religion has successfully worn them down before.

John cries out in the wilderness of our church's confusion, testifying anew to the light. There is hope and promise in these Advent days, proclaims John. When we grow weary of the divisions, when we institution-keepers admit that we are no longer willing to enforce the lines in the sand that we have drawn, then we might be

ready to see that light and to follow the directions of the guy in the hair shirt.