

Sunday, December 8, 2013: Matthew 3:1-12

by [Hardy Kim](#) in the [November 27, 2013](#) issue

As associate pastor for evangelism, I work to welcome new people into a large urban congregation. As I delve into the complexities of outreach in this postmodern age, I find that some of the most interesting conversations happen when I'm speaking to people who work in marketing.

Marketing attempts to connect individuals or communities with a product through branding. I talked with a professional who once helped market Gatorade, a brand that most of us know. I was surprised to hear that Gatorade marketers consider tap water to be part of the competition. Then I realized that their concern made absolute sense. Tap water is natural, it hydrates the body, is healthy and low in calories, *and it is free*. Tap water is an alternative to any sports drink.

I often hear about new or creative strategies for growing the church. Every once in a while a church embarks on an outreach campaign that strikes a chord in the surrounding community—and all of us other churchpeople scurry to figure out what's going on. This is doubly true if the persons reached are younger than 40.

Given declining numbers, a congregation's concern with outreach and growth—and the constant monitoring of the "competition"—is understandable. But it's also a bit embarrassing to think about how anxious we are about our numbers; how we worry about people connecting with our "brand"; how we sometimes scramble to compete with other congregations for a target audience.

As I read Matthew's story about some Judean clerics witnessing the spectacle of a madman preaching in the wilderness, I wonder if those clerics weren't experiencing some anxiety about their relevance in the local religious marketplace. Were they checking out the competition? They probably hoped that the raving camel-hair-wearing, locust-and-honey-eating prophet was a temporary sideshow they could discount as flashy marketing—full of shock value but empty of theological weight.

But before the leaders of the respectable, established name-brand Judean faith community can get close enough to see what's going on, John shouts out to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit

worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

John's words challenge all of us who worry about congregational growth. What difference does "doing church" make if lives are not changed? Then he warns against the certainty of our belief in our traditions. Will our time-honored ways of thinking about God and our relationship with Jesus save us when so much in our knowledge of ourselves and the world has changed? What good does it do to connect others to our traditions and values if those traditions don't address challenges that those persons face?

John the Baptist retreated from the established centers of religious life and went out into the wilderness, the messy real world, to speak to people about God. I too benefit from stepping back from the cramped vistas and narrow mind-sets that often define the religious landscape as I know it. From a distance I can see that we're not competing against other churches. We're competing against all the other ways that people find real community, meaning and spiritual nourishment.

My colleague John and I recently organized a fund-raiser for friends who serve as international mission coworkers. We wanted to gather as many people as possible and convince them to fund our friends in their good work. John and I both love barbecue, so we decided to make the event a barbecue cook-off. We needed an appealing and accessible setting, so we held the event in a local pub.

Our barbecue cook-off raised far more money than we anticipated. People ate and drank, laughed, connected with each other and celebrated the gifts of our friends who were leaving. When another pastoral colleague led us in singing "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us," we felt God's Spirit and were renewed in our baptisms. Our eyes were opened to the presence of the holy in the wilderness of a neighborhood pub.

After this success, John and I are more inspired than ever to do church differently. We're considering a football tailgating church service before football games (a place where Americans can get a dose of community on a Sunday). To our peers we're starting to look like wide-eyed, camel-hair-wearing babblers. But if our goal is to prepare the way for God's coming—to give people an appealing and accessible way of connecting with God—then it doesn't matter much if the way we do church looks Reformed or orthodox. What matters is its impact on the lives of those around us.