

Advent 3C 2015 Sermon

December 13, 2015

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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 thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

I remember when I first started attending the Episcopal Church, and I heard John the Baptist's fiery speeches read during Advent. I was shocked! You see, the Congregational church in which I was raised did not use the lectionary; the pastor chose whatever scripture readings he wanted for any particular Sunday. And I can say pretty confidently that on the Sundays leading up to Christmas our pastor NEVER read the stories of John the Baptist.

And yet over the years I have come to appreciate the wisdom of the ancient tradition of listening to John the Baptist during Advent, for he instructs us to do what we sing in the Christmas carol: "Let every heart prepare him room." In today's Gospel, John the Baptist is helping us to prepare room in our hearts for the birth of Christ anew. How does he do this? I would suggest that he does it in three ways.

The first way John shows us how to prepare room in our hearts is by his own example of humility and of emptying himself.

Richard Rohr explains (in *Preparing for Christmas*):

[John the Baptist's spirituality] is brilliantly a spirituality of *descent*, not *ascent*. [John says of Jesus,] "He must grow bigger, I must grow smaller" (Jn 3:30) [and "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals."].

The only way such freedom can happen is if John learned to be very empty of himself... His ego was out of the way so much that he could let go of his own ego, his own message, and even his own life... There's got to be such emptiness [in our **own** lives], or **we** cannot point beyond *ourselves* to Jesus, as John did. Such emptiness doesn't just fall into our laps; such humility does not just happen. It is surely the end product of a thousand letting-goes and a thousand acts of devotion...

But letting go, emptying ourselves, is not something we normally **like** to do, so we need to intentionally *practice* doing it, if we are indeed to prepare room in our hearts for the Christ Child. The daily practice of Centering Prayer is **one** such discipline in letting go. I have personally found this practice *essential* to my spiritual health and growth, and I strongly encourage each of you to engage in **some** daily practice whereby you let go of *your* ego and empty *yourself* – whether it be Centering Prayer or some other practice. (We'll be offering another Introduction to Centering Prayer workshop in January.)

It's that letting go of one's own ego, one's own agenda, surrendering oneself to God through countless acts of devotion and letting go – it is **that**, I think, which is the *first* great gift John the Baptist gives us, models for us. We cannot "prepare him room" in our hearts if our hearts are filled with our own (false) selves. Now, if the necessity of emptying ourselves and letting go of our egos is John's *first* gift and example to us, then John's *second* gift to us, which is related to the first, is his challenge to our sense of privilege and entitlement. John exhorts the crowds, "*Do not begin 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.*"

"We have Abraham as our ancestor" is a statement of privileged status and entitlement. And though we may deny it vehemently (because it is below the surface of our consciousness), we middle class white Christian Americans often **unconsciously** claim for ourselves privileged status: privileged status over against immigrants, those of a different race, those of a different socio-economic status, those who have made major mistakes in their lives and are paying the price for it, those who practice a different religion. And we have all sorts of reasons that we unconsciously think we have "earned" this privileged status. We were born in this country and English is our native language; we are Christians and this is a Christian nation; we worked hard and sacrificed a lot to get to where we are; etc. This way of thinking is so unconscious that we find it hard to see that these are statements of *entitlement*. Were we in John the Baptist's audience that day, he might have warned us, "Do not say, 'We are English-speaking Christian Americans,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up English-

speaking Christian Americans. Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” You and I may have been born English-speaking Christian Americans; we may have worked hard, studied hard, and “made something” of our lives – but have we born the fruits of love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity without which, according to John, we might as well be cut down and thrown into the fire?

Richard Rohr notes that our culture holds up as of highest honor what he calls “the Loyal Soldier.” “The Loyal Soldier,” Rohr writes, “is similar to the elder son in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. His loyalty to strict meritocracy, to his own entitlement, to obedience, and *supposedly* to his father keeps him from the very celebration his father has prepared, even though the father begs his son to come to the feast (Luke 15:25-32). We have no indication the elder son ever came!...

“Jesus makes the same point in his story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14), in which the Pharisee is loyal and observant and, yet, Jesus says, he missed the point; while the other who has not obeyed the law at all, but *admits* it, is ironically deemed ‘at rights with God’! ... Yet most of Christianity never got the point, and ended up creating lots of elder sons and Pharisees. Both the elder son and the Pharisee are good, loyal soldiers—exactly what most of us in the church were told was the very meaning of religion.” (Adapted from *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, p. 45)

“Until we have met the Merciful One,” Fr. Rohr concludes, “until we’ve experienced unconditional love, I think we all operate out of some kind of meritocracy: ‘You get what you deserve, and no more than you deserve.’ Until we honorably discharge this Loyal Soldier, who knows little about **real** love, we will find it hard to meet the Merciful One. The Loyal Soldier keeps many Christians from enlightenment, from transformation, from love, from forgiveness, from grace. The Loyal Soldier wears the common disguise of loyalty, obedience, and old-time religion, which is all you have until you have experienced undeserved and unmerited love.” (*ibid.*)

John the Baptist is warning us about this “Loyal Soldier” mentality when he exhorts, “*Do not begin 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.*” God is able from these stones to raise up “Loyal soldiers”. This message is John the Baptist’s second gift, to help us prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ-Child by honorably discharging our “Loyal Soldier.” Our Loyal Soldier may have served us well in the first half of life, when we were appropriately building our egos, but in the second half of life it must be thanked and bid farewell, or our spiritual growth will be frozen.

John’s third gift to help us prepare our hearts is his instruction to put love of neighbor into action in our lives.

In verses unique to Luke's Gospel, various people in John's audience ask, "What then are we to *do*?" John's response "seems fairly ordinary, even mundane. To the (presumably poor) crowds [he says]: 'Share.' To the tax collectors, 'Be fair.' To soldiers, 'Don't bully.'

David Lose comments, "This feels... like the stuff of Kindergarten... Which may be Luke's point. Fidelity does not have to be heroic. There are opportunities to do God's will, to be God's people, all around us. These opportunities are shaped by our context: the roles in which we find ourselves and the needs of the neighbor with which we are confronted. But make no mistake, opportunities abound." (*from the blog, "Dear partner in preaching", Dec. 7, 2015*)

And so it is that **we** – present-day members of the crowd to whom John speaks – **also** ask, "What should *we* do – in our context, with our particular neighbors?"

Many of you are already putting the love of Christ into action in your lives, loving your neighbor in many ways. As I said on Stewardship Sunday, we as a congregation are very generous with our *financial* giving. But I want to end this reflection on our Gospel by mentioning that after the First of the Year, our SWEEPS Council will consider several practical ways that we can serve our neighbors in more hands-on, relational ways. For as DeeDee Clement, the Director of Loaves and Fishes, said to Mike Smith and me when we met with her on Friday, "The goal is not just to give food or clothing away, but to develop relationships with some of these people who have been beaten down and have no family or friends, and to transform their lives in Christ's love."

John the Baptist could not have said it better.

AMEN