

Advent 3C 2018 Sermon

December 16, 2018

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 in church during Advent. I was shocked! You see, the Congregational church in which I was raised did not use the lectionary. We sang Christmas Carols throughout December (I don't think we even talked about "Advent".) 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 our Christmas carol: "Let every heart prepare him room." We often blithely sing those words without actually stopping to **do** what they say: to prepare room for Christ in our hearts. It's not an easy task! So, in today's Gospel, John the Baptist is helping us to prepare room in our hearts. 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.

In *John's* Gospel, John the Baptist points his followers toward Jesus and says, “*He* must increase; *I* must decrease.”¹ In *today's* Gospel, John the Baptist says, “I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” This is not self-denigration **or** a false humility; it is genuine humbleness of heart. Richard Rohr writes: “John learned to be very empty of himself... 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...”²

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, which many of us practice, is **one** such discipline in letting go, in self-emptying. There are others, and I’d be happy to help you choose a practice, if you’d like. It’s all about being freed from the domination of our own ego and our ego’s 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. In fact, Christ **himself** modeled it for us, as we chanted earlier in “A Song of Christ’s Humility.”³ We cannot “prepare him room” in our hearts if our hearts are filled with our own (ego) selves.

If pointing out 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 – or, to use the metaphor of our hymn, a statement of “pedigree”.⁴ And though we may deny it (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 those of a different race, those of a different socio-economic status, those with less education, those with some physical or mental handicap, those fleeing wars and violence and poverty in their own countries, those who have made major mistakes in their lives and are paying the price for it, those who were born into a different religion, etc. And we unconsciously think we have “earned” this privileged status. Almost all of us are white, middle-class, English-speaking, Christian Americans! Yet, for almost all of us, these things are an accident of our birth. We worked hard and sacrificed a lot to get to where we are, but we almost certainly *learned* hard work and sacrifice from the parents to whom we happened to be born, and the middle class into which we happened to be born.

This way of thinking is so unconscious that we find it hard to see that to be a white, middle-class, English-speaking, hard-working, Christian American is to be *entitled*. Were John the Baptist to preach to us today, he might warn us, “Do not say, ‘I am a white, middle-class, English-speaking, hard-working Christian American,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up white, middle-class, English-speaking, hard-working Christian Americans.” You and I may have been born in the right country to the right parents, who taught us to work hard and study hard and “make something” of our lives – but have we borne the fruits of love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity without which, according to John the Baptist, 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...

“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.”⁵

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 the stones of this building to raise up “Loyal soldiers”. 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 our Loyal Soldier must be thanked and bid farewell, or our spiritual growth will be frozen. This message is John the Baptist’s second gift to help us prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ-Child.

John’s third gift to help us prepare our hearts is his instruction to put love of neighbor into action in our lives, since pouring ourselves out for others opens our hearts.

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 [the] point. [Faithfulness] 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.”⁶

And so it is that **we** – present-day members of the crowd to whom John speaks – must ask *ourselves*, “What should *we* do to love and serve others in *our* context?”

My friends, I know that many of you are already working at this three-fold teaching of John the Baptist: emptying yourself; seeing through the smokescreens of your unconscious entitlement; and putting the love of Christ into action in your life on behalf of your neighbor. Yet, we human beings have a way of letting complacency seep into our unconscious minds, and we have an endless capacity to deceive ourselves – at least I do!

And that is why each and every year in Advent we must hear with fresh ears the exhortations of John the Baptist, who teaches us **how** to “let every heart prepare him room.”

AMEN

¹ John 3:30

² Richard Rohr, *Preparing for Christmas*

³ Cantic taken from Philippians 2:5-11

⁴ “The Pedigree” hymn text by John Bell

⁵ from *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, p. 45

⁶ from the blog, “*Dear partner in preaching*”, Dec. 7, 2015