

Luke 3:7-18  
13 Dec. 09

### “What Was Wrong with Those People?”

“People don’t come to church to be judged, to be criticized, and made to feel uncomfortable.” That’s what a preacher once said to a group of preachers at a sermon workshop. There was widespread agreement from the gathered clergy. “Laity come to church to be stroked, to be patted on the head and told that they are doing fine just as they are,” he said. And while that might be overstating it a little, I think it is true that very few people want to be browbeaten, told they are failures—or even that they are sinners. It’s no fun hearing it, and I can tell you it’s no fun saying it either.

Apparently, John the Baptist never got that message. According to Luke John begins his sermon with these words, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” And yet the people came out to hear this wild looking prophet. I wonder why?

William Willimon comments on seeing a preacher on TV who on a bad Sunday preaches to more folk than I do in several years put together. Willimon says, “His sermon began with, ‘You are good! You mean well. You want to have a happy life, but these negative naysayers keep dragging you down.’ He then advised us to get up each morning, look in the mirror, and say, ‘I will have a good day! I do believe in me!’ And though he didn’t mention God in his sermon (what on earth could God do for a congregation that’s capable of doing all that?), 16,000 people listened to his speech gladly.”

But John the Baptist says, ‘Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not even *begin* to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” And yet the people came out to hear him. I wonder why?

Currently, the fastest growing segment of American religion is the prosperity Gospel. In its baldest form it says that if you have faith, God will make you rich; God will get you that big house, car, job, etc. Megachurches have been built around this teaching.

And then there is John, who didn’t get the memo on that one either. There is John, who says, “If you have two coats, give one away to someone who doesn’t even have one. And stop being so greedy that you use your position to steal.” And yet the crowds came out, made what for some of them was a long, hard trip down to the Jordan to be baptized by him. Why would anybody do that?

What was wrong with those people? And what in the world was wrong with this Gospel writer whom we call Luke? At the end of today’s reading, right after John says, “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,” Luke adds, “So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.” What makes this good news?

Well, it’s not good news if you like things just the way they are. If you like things just the way they are, then you will be disquieted by talk of Holy Spirit and fire and winnowing and cleansing. But if your heart aches for justice, if your heart aches for a better world, or if your heart just aches for those whose hearts ache, then this is Gospel good news. It is news of a God who acts by sending messengers and prophets; it is news of a God who cares, cares enough to come down and live with us and die for us.

Getting ready for this coming of the LORD is what John the Baptist is all about. His words are strong and harsh. And at the end of them the people who have come all this way to hear John, ask a refreshingly pragmatic question, the same question they will ask on Pentecost, “What then shall we do?”

There is no gnashing of teeth. Neither is there anger directed at John for his words. Neither is there any, “That’s it! I’m going

somewhere where they tell me how to get what I want.” Rather, there is this pragmatic question, “What then shall we do? OK, John, we get your point. Tell us how to get ready for this winnowing and cleansing.”

And surprise of surprises, John just tells the people to behave nicely. He tells them stuff they’ve been hearing since kindergarten: Share. Be fair. Don’t bully. Share . . . Your extra coat with someone who doesn’t have one. Be fair . . . in collecting your taxes; just take what’s yours. Don’t bully . . . yes, you’re a soldier, but don’t use that to push people around. Share; be fair; don’t bully. That’s it. Nothing fancy or dramatic. Just basic kindergarten morality.

Are you as surprised at this as am I? The first surprise is a reminder much needed among grace-centered Lutherans such as we that faith in God is more about what we do than it is about what we believe. Most of Jesus’ teaching has do with trusting the love of God, sharing God’s passion for the lost, and using our money and possessions in ways that honor God. Almost none of it has to do with doctrine or what you have to believe to get into heaven. Almost all of it has to do with how to live this life in ways that make credible and embody the God who is love.

The second surprise is that what we are asked to do is so doable. Share; be fair; don’t bully says John. Jesus’ list is a little longer than this, but not much different in character. Each speak of how to live righteously, how to live in a just and harmonious relationship with those whom God has given us, where we look out for those who cannot look out for themselves, and where we worship God. I have a friend who likes to emphasize the importance of personal responsibility, of taking care of your health and your wealth so that you are not a burden on others. While that isn’t directly addressed in this text, I’d certainly add it, and I’ll be on the lookout for it in biblical texts. It’s part of righteous living.

I don’t think life is simple; I think it’s pretty complicated. But what God wants is pretty simple, though because of sin and greed and

psychological junk, etc., it seems hard for us to pull it off. I don’t know, maybe John the baptist had some more complicated things to say about how we should live. But for now he’s still repeating the kindergarten lessons.

The coming of the LORD is a fearful thing. And at the same time it is greatly to be longed for. It is to be longed for because the judgement that comes with the LORD’s arrival is a judgement that sets things right, a judgement of cleansing, purifying, and refining. God has no interest in letting anyone fail. God’s cleansing judgement is a saving judgement. I think the people who went out to hear John knew that, knew that the coming winnowing and threshing is good news indeed.