

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.

What Shall We Do? - December 12, 2021

Luke 3:7-18

I've been in a good number of churches over the years. I've visited and preached in medium-sized sanctuaries like ours (yes this is medium-sized). I've been in small chapels and large cathedrals. I've visited churches made of cinderblock and had holes in the wall where the windows would go someday and having roofs made of metal which made a huge racket when it rained. I've been in churches with elaborate architecture and beautiful stained glass windows. I've prayed in the worship spaces of other religions — who, by the way, treat their holy areas with the same respect we do ours.

In fact, that is what they all have in common. People of all faiths regard the place where they encounter God as deserving of great beauty and special attention. I attended a wedding in Maine in a church that from the outside seemed fairly plain. Yet on the inside, an artist had created a mural that covered every wall and the ceiling. The mural depicted numerous Biblical scenes, but recreated them as if they were taking place in Maine.

I pastored a small church in Western Pennsylvania which was founded by Hungarians a century ago. They were mostly poor coal miners. Yet the interior of the church was astonishing beautiful in its simplicity and covered with Christian symbols taken from the Old country. We know our Eastern Orthodox friends love their icons and our Roman Catholic friends often place the statues of saints and even Jesus and Mary in their sanctuaries. Every Jewish synagogue has a special case in the front in which is kept a copy of the Torah, written entirely in Hebrew by hand.

For many believers of all faiths, our worship spaces are intended to create feelings in us. Feelings of awe, wonder, respect, and peace. The special care we take at this time of year to decorate the sanctuary with the trees, the hangings, the flowers echoes these feelings. At a church I served in Africa, they built a small stable in the front of the church, complete with straw and a life sized manger. We reenacted the nativity (at least with the people, the animals were not invited!).

Part of the function of the church and these wonderful places where we worship God is to break us out of our fixation on the world. This place and all the places around the world are supposed to be different. The Bell Choir, the organ, the “smells and bells” rituals our Episcopal friends, the chants heard during a Taizé service — all these are intended to remind us that we are not at our place of work, we are not in our homes. This is different. Here we experience God, however we understand God to be.

Now I'll admit, some people, perhaps many people, are turned off by the "otherness" of this place. They look at this beautiful space and ask what does this beauty have to do with the needs and concerns of the world? How can we spend so much time and effort creating this beautiful space when there are so many needs in the world today? Isn't all this display just a waste of money which could have been given to help the poor?

Well, yes and no. There is no question that the money people paid to sponsor the beautiful stained glass windows in our church could have been spent on other causes and helped people suffering in so many ways. I've heard, I'm sure you've heard the accusation that if the Roman Catholic Church sold its art collection, they could help millions of people suffering from starvation and disease. And, yes, I suppose they are right.

Jesus himself was confronted with the same question when a few weeks before he died, a woman broke an expensive jar of perfume and poured all over him. When his disciples criticized her for wasting the perfume and not selling it to give the proceeds to the poor, Jesus commended her and said she had done a beautiful thing for him. She was preparing his body for its burial. She was singling Jesus out for the respect he deserved.

Nonetheless, the disciples had a point. On the one hand, we must take time to separate from the world to celebrate the glory and majesty of God. We need to recognize that there is much, much, more to life than what our eyes and ears can sense. When we cut the holy out of our lives and living, we confine ourselves to only what our human senses can experience. And by now, I hope you have come to realize that God's creation is more vast, wondrous, and mind-blowing beyond our human capacity to comprehend.

However, in realizing and appreciating the true awe-someness of God — the God that makes us stop and think, we wonder for ourselves about the incredible majesty of creation and the sheer unknowableness of God. We realize our poor ability to comprehend the great mystery of how our own bodies somehow get formed in our mothers' wombs and we are born and we somehow learn how to function in this world. We must also remember that God did not create us randomly. God created us for a purpose — for a reason!

We know why God created us — I hope. God created us to be in community with each other. The reason we worship God is to remind us that God intends for us to live our lives in ways that reflect God's love for each of us individually. God made you and God made me not so we can get as rich as we can or as powerful as we can or show off our talents and abilities. No. God made you to benefit

me and God made me to benefit you. In short, we are all in this together. We are all here for each other. Our lives are tied directly to each other's lives. When you do better, I do better. When I do better, yes, you also should be doing better. We are here to help and support each other — that is God's essential message to us.

The beauty of this church, the beauty of this season is all intended to remind us of God and therefore remind us of our obligation to each other.

That, friends, was the message John the Baptizer brought to the people. John's purpose laid the foundation for Jesus and his ministry. John began his work by reminding his listeners that as God's people, true worship was much, much more than simply attending worship. Rather, worship was about taking action — actions that we could perform for each other. All this church stuff we do, all our worship, Bible Study, prayer — all of this means nothing unless we convert our worship, study, and prayer into definitive actions that improve everyone's lives.

The people asked John, "What should we do?" Yes, John, after you baptized us, after you encouraged us to repent, after you've challenged us to think about our lives and our sins, and how we have fallen short of God's will for us, what should we do?

And John did not say, pray more. And John did not say, go to worship more. And John did not say, increase your offerings. John said none of that. Instead, John told the people to do, to act, to make a difference in each other's lives.

John said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." In other words, John said God wants us to share. For John, the greatest sin of all was to have the ability to do something for another but refuse to do so. No question, John meant to make his listeners uncomfortable. He told them and he tells us to look closely at our lives and ask ourselves what we have. John reminds us that everything that we do have in our lives is solely and entirely a gift from God. Don't fool yourself. It doesn't matter what your education is, it doesn't matter what your job title is, it doesn't matter how big your bank account is, whatever you have is there because of God — because of hundreds and millions of factors well beyond your control.

So John tells us to look at our blessings and share from our abundance. This could be money. This could be possessions. This could be time. This could be love. You are blessed. We are blessed. We all have the ability to give something from our abundance. That is what we should be doing.

Yet John goes further. He was asked by tax collectors and soldiers, of all people, what they should be doing. It's a bit interesting that these two groups are mentioned in the gospels because among all

occupations, those of tax collector and soldier were the most hated. Tax collectors and soldiers were agents of the Roman Empire, the government that occupied and oppressed the Jewish people. Yet some Jewish people were tax collectors and some Jewish people were soldiers. Jews participated in the oppression of their fellow Jews.

But did it ever occur to you that the Jews who were tax collectors and soldiers did these jobs not necessarily because they wanted to but because they, like all of us, had to make a living, support their families, and just plain survive? Haven't you, in your life, ever held a job you absolutely hated? Haven't you been paid to do work you thought was questionable, but did it because there did not seem to be any alternatives? If you haven't, good for you! But if you have, God understands your predicament. When tax collectors and soldiers asked John what to do, he did not say quit your jobs! He did not tell these people who found themselves in a terrible situation to stop earning a living because John knew they had no choice at least at the time.

But what John did tell them was to do their jobs — but as fairly and honestly as they could. John told the tax collectors and soldiers to not exploit their positions. John said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." He told the soldiers, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." In other words, be fair, be decent, be honest. Treat the people you deal with as you would want to be treated.

John the Baptizer is pointing the way to Jesus and Jesus points the way to a very different way of life and living. There is no point to the beauty of this sanctuary and the sense otherness it causes us to experience unless our daily lives are being changed.

Christmas, friends, Christmas is not about giving gifts. Christmas is about being different. Jesus is about being different. Our faith should be causing us to be different from the world. We cannot think only about ourselves, our possessions, our status in the world. We cannot think only about having things when there are those who have nothing. We cannot forget that there are many people doing work and trapped in situations they very much do not want to be in.

Yet God is here for all of us. God is here for those of us who have and God is here for those of us who have not. God is here for those who are satisfied and content with our place in life and God is there for those who want things to change but are not in a position to make things change at this time.

This is the good news that John the Baptizer is spreading, preparing the way for Jesus. John's message is as valid and meaningful now as it was then because he does answer the question we are all asking. What should we do? Love each other as we love ourselves. That is what we should do.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.