

Simple Gifts

^{NRS} **Luke 3:7** 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?" ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Well last week we kicked off Advent with Jesus talking about the end of the world, and this morning we have just another holiday classic of a text, don't we? We have John the Baptist this morning screaming at people and calling them a brood of vipers. I mean it's not "Chestnuts Roasting Over an Open Fire" or anything, but it's as close as we're going to get with the lectionary.

We start out with John this morning, in the middle of nowhere. And all of these people start showing up. All these crowds start arriving. Now I would think he'd be happy about this. I would think he'd like the company, or at least be pleased that so many people want to hear his words. If John were a Presbyterian for instance, he'd would tell them how happy he is to see them. He'd thank them for coming out- especially during the busy holiday season, I mean with all that shopping to do and all

those parties to go to. And he'd tell them where the bathrooms are- the women have those palm trees over there, the men have those scrubby bushes near the ditch. And of course the food- there's always the food. He'd tell them they've got an open bar- all of the locusts and honey you can eat. And most of all he'd just tell them how glad he is to see them and how he's sure they were going to really meaningful time together.

But John...well let's just say John is not a Presbyterian. His welcome goes like this: "Hello brood of vipers." "Welcome, brood of vipers. And then he really starts in on them. "Who told you about the coming wrath? Don't kid yourselves that just because you're an Israelite that you're covered. God doesn't care whether you're an Israelite or not- God can raise up children from stones if God wants to. No, even now the ax is lying at the tree, if you aren't bearing good fruit- Sayonara!"

I thought about all those people out there this week- especially the ones who maybe didn't even really want to be there. You know, the ones who kind of got dragged along by a family member or a girl friend. Some of you know how that is especially this time of year- you know, you're like, "Ugh, church!" but then you go because it's the nice thing to do. And then when they get there, not only does John not thank them for coming, but he attacks them!

In college I took a really interesting English class on the Bible that taught the Bible as literature. Ernie Kaulbach was the professor- he was a FASCINATING guy. He was this ex-priest with this crew cut and had a mouth like a sailor. Well, I invited my roommate, John, to come one day. John grew up Pentecostal and had actually worked for a televangelist answering phones and praying with folks over the phone- that kind of

thing. I told him he just had to come and check this guy out- it would be like nothing he had ever heard. Well, the day John showed up, Kaulbach was talking about the book of Job. And there's no way I can even come close to repeating what he said or did. Let's just say that at the end of the class he was summing up the end of the book where God comes out of the whirlwind to talk to Job. And God at that point is very much saying to Job, who do you think you are- where were you when I created the earth, where were you when I made the animals. And on and on. Well, Kaulbach paraphrases this in a MUCH more colorful way making GENEROUS use of the f-word, and let's just say he added hand gestures to really make his point extra clear. Now, I had told John Kaulbach was kind of different- but this was WAY off the reservation, even for him. So, I kind of peek over at John feeling awful I brought him- and he did have a kind of stunned look, but thank goodness he started to laugh when our eyes met.

Well I imagine it was something like this going out to see John the Baptist- I mean it was just like nothing you've ever heard before. It was shocking. And the people here quite naturally say the only thing that makes sense. They say...um, ok, John, what are we supposed to do then? What are we supposed to do? If just being an Israelite isn't enough. If making this crazy journey out there to the desert isn't enough? What are we supposed to do?

And it's a fascinating thing. You would think, I would think, that if you ask someone like John what you have to do be saved he'd talk about belief. He'd tell you to trust in the Messiah who is coming or something like that. But he doesn't. He doesn't talk about theology, about belief at all. He talks about action.

He says to the crowds, what do you need to do? Well, if you have two coats, give away the one you don't need. You don't need two coats. You can't wear two coats? If you have an extra one give it away. And the same goes for food. If you've got extra, pass it around.

And then he names two groups separately. He points out the tax collectors- and the author here is shocked they even showed up saying *even* the tax collectors came to be baptized. What happens is the tax collectors pay the Romans up front- and then they go collect from you, and anything they collect on top of what's owed is theirs to keep. So tax collectors would come and tell you what you owed, and if you didn't pay up, why Lefty here would make sure you weren't going to be playing the zither anytime soon. So they were hated and treated like the criminals most of them were. And John tells them- hey you tax collectors, stop it! He tells them to just collect the amount they're owed- no more, no less.

And it's the same with the soldiers. The soldiers show up and John singles them out, too. Commentators tell us that the soldiers here are probably not Roman soldiers- they are probably local mercenaries hired by the Romans to keep the peace. The problem is they weren't paid much to do this. And so a lot of soldiers found it tempting not to pad their meager paycheck here and there by extortion- after all they had the swords and the clubs, the people did not. And John says to them what he said to the tax collectors- hey you soldiers. Stop taking from the people. Just live on your wages- it's enough!

So what are we supposed to do, John? How can we be saved? Easy, he says. Live more justly. What John gives us here is a little talk, a sermon, if you will on social justice.

Now, again this week I have to be honest with you. Last week I told you how much I didn't like the apocalyptic, end of the world, kinds of texts. And this morning, well I don't mean to sound whiney, but this morning I will tell you that I probably feel even MORE nervous about sermons on social justice.

In my experience the church has been about as good at talking about social justice as we have been about talking about politics and sex. And in case you've been out of the church loop for, say, oh about the last 2,000 years...we haven't done that great.

Nearly every sermon or conversation about social and economic justice I've been a part of in the church devolves at some point where the person talking about justice begins to sound judgmental and holier-than-thou, and everyone is made to feel ground down, guilty, and more hopeless than they started out feeling.

In my senior year in seminary I took Christian ethics. There were a lot of things I liked about the class- we read a lot of Karl Barth for one thing. But one thing was very hard for me. Being an ethics class social justice was pretty much what we talked about the whole time- and while I agreed with most of what our professor was saying, her tone, the way she framed the issues was so difficult for me. Towards the end of the semester she started talking about corporations, for instance, and she spent an entire lecture on how awful corporations are and the people who work for them are. And yeah, the stories she shared were true and awful, and I would be the first person to agree that yes, corporations

have made some really terrible actions. But what was so frustrating to me how we talked about it as if WE were somehow disconnected from THOSE people in corporations, as if we were in some kind of pure, little world set apart from their awfulness.

So, when it was time, I raised my hand and I told that while I certainly agreed with a lot of what she said, I said it bothered me that we were talking about corporations as if we weren't really connected with them- and of course we are. Our food, our clothing, our books in class- nearly everything in our lives is affected by a corporation at some point. And when I mentioned clothes, she got a smile on her face. And she had a very quick come back to this and smugly announce to the class that she just recently purchased shoes for her children that were not made in a, and I quote, corporate sweat shop. She apparently forked over a pretty penny for these hand made shoes and preened as if I had made her point.

But now I was kind of angry. And I kind of stepped over the line a little bit. I congratulated her on her shoes and said, "But what about your salary? What about your pension?" Her position was an endowed chair- and I asked if she knew where the funds that endowed this chair were invested, or the funds that would provide for her retirement. And without allowing her to answer I said it for her- corporations. They are invested in corporations.

Now, this was not my finest moment. I will be the first to admit that I was being a jerk. I certainly wasn't being very wise. If David Norse, our seminarian called me up and asked me whether he should attack a professor in class and getting person about their pension funds, I would tell him this would probably be a very bad idea. And I believed I paid for this- I probably worked harder in her class than in my others that semester, but I

received the lowest grade I would ever receive in school from her. And in my gut I believe it was because of this moment.

But although I was sorry for the way I said what I said, and I did apologize to her for my tone, I did not apologize for what I said. If there is one thing we cannot do as people of faith- we cannot prop ourselves up as judge over everyone else and pretend that our hands are somehow clean. We can never talk about any justice issue, but particularly an economic justice issue, without acknowledging we are as fully and completely part of the system as everyone else. It's never us cut off from the rest of the world- it's all of us in it together.

And believe it or not, this is where John the Baptist really helps us. You know he starts out with this awful temper- he's calling people a brood of vipers and he's telling them that unless they shape up they're all gonna get axed down. He's this crazy guy living out there in the middle of nowhere eating bugs and wild honey- he'd fit right in in NE Portland, hanging out somewhere on Hawthorne or riding along Burnside with a Ralph Nader sticker on his bike.

But when he talks about justice and what they must do with these regular, ordinary people who have come out to see him- well, it's in the most modest way. He doesn't scream at them. He doesn't shout at them. He doesn't hold them up to some impossible ideal. He doesn't even tell them to quit their lives back in the city and to live with him out there in the desert. Did you notice what he asks of them?

If you have an extra coat, share it with someone else. He doesn't say get rid of all your clothing and shame on you for having them. No, he says if you have extra, share. And the same goes with food.

And the tax collectors- oh my word! Tax collectors were considered nearly the worst people on earth. Tax collectors were some of the most hated people around. You would think John would tell them to get a conscience and to quit their jobs. But he doesn't. John doesn't tell them to quit being tax collectors- he doesn't even tell them to stop making money. He simply tells them to take a little less, to stop taking more from people than is due. He tells them to stay tax collectors- just do it a little better.

And the same goes with the soldiers. I would think a guy like John would tell them to lay their swords down and join him in the desert. But he doesn't. John doesn't shame them and tell them to stop. He tells them to go back and be soldiers- we need soldiers. But be better soldiers. Live on what you make, and he satisfied with this- it's enough.

I was shocked this week that John just didn't go crazy and tell people if they want to live justly they have to stop being who they are, and radically uproot their lives, and to just change everything. No, he tells them to stay doing what they are doing- be who they are. Be tax collectors. Be soldiers. But find ways, small ways, to do it better.

You know Christmas has always bugged me a little bit. I've preached about it before. It's always bugged me a little that we take this simple, simple little story- this story about what is in essence a homeless child born in a barn with nothing but the warmth and love of his family; and the extravaganza that is Christmas for us, an

extravaganza I have more than participated in I hasten to add. I mean we celebrate the Christ child by acting like it's our birthday and 25th wedding anniversary all rolled into one.

And there has always been a part of me, this grinchy part of me that has felt like we should just stop it all- we should just stop all the shopping and the endless marathons of parties.

But you know, what I'm hearing from John is that maybe we don't need to do this to celebrate Christmas in a better way. Maybe we don't need to completely unplug the Christmas machine as the book says- maybe we need to keep the Christmas in the way that our families have, but do it a little bit better.

My challenge to you this Christmas. Sit down with your families, or your friends- whoever you are celebrating Christmas with. And talk about what one thing you would like to do that would make this Christmas a little bit better- a little bit more just. Maybe you want to give the food pantry a call and see if you could volunteer- not for the whole season but for what would be reasonable. Maybe you will want to take a star off of the giving tree and provide something for family that needs it. Maybe you want to think globally and want to buy one of those fertile goats from Heifer project or there is a group I know about called Living Water and for 98 cents you can give a child clean water for a year.

Let's keep Christmas this year. Let's celebrate. Let's have fun. Let's buy presents. But let's also do it just a little bit better, because after all, it isn't our birthday we're celebrating, is it? **Amen.**