

Sermon for Sunday, December 16, 2018

“What Then Should We Do?”

Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Apparently, John didn't get the memo on the need for civility and calm, balanced discourse. “You brood of vipers,” he rants, “who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” He sounds like God's prophets of old and like a lot of people on Facebook these days.

John the Baptist has a sense of urgency, an urgency many of us feel about the state of the world right now. This is no time for complacency. Things need to change.

John makes it clear that the change needs to come within us first.

We need to repent and live in God's ways of justice and mercy.

We need to bear good fruit.

Yet this is not work we can do on our own.

We need God.

We need God to deal with the evil in each of us.

We need God to bring an ax to what is preventing us from bearing good fruit - all the weeds that have grown as tall as trees within us.

We need God to separate the wheat from the chaff in our lives and then burn away the chaff.

This is what John says God will do in Jesus and what God will do at the end of time. It is what we need but it is also a bit frightening.

It seems those first crowds to hear John the Baptist were also frightened by all this. “What then should we do?” they ask.

And John's answer is a bit surprising. In the midst of his extreme rhetoric, John gives simple, direct answers. He tells the crowds: share what you have. He tells the tax collectors: be fair. And the soldiers: don't bully, be satisfied with what you have. Share, be fair, don't bully, you have enough. This sounds like what we learn in kindergarten.

And, this is surprising language from a radical prophet in the wilderness who wore camel skin and ate locusts and wild honey. Given how he lived and preached, we might expect John's instructions to be more radical - more like, “Give away all your clothes, you don't need coats, you can wear a camel skin like me.” Instead he says if you have two coats, give one away and share your food. It's also a bit surprising how John addresses tax collectors and soldiers. They are working with the oppressive Roman Empire; they are preying on their own people. Many in the crowd are probably shocked that John is even speaking to them - tax collectors should be ostracized, soldiers should be avoided.

And, if he must address the scum working for Rome, you'd think he'd say something like, "Renounce everything Roman, become pacifists and live in the wilderness with me." Yet he doesn't tell them to stop being tax collectors, to stop being soldiers. He simply tells them to not charge too much, not extort, and be satisfied with what they earn.

What then can we do? Share, be fair, don't bully, be content. This is not extreme, heroic stuff. It is stuff that each of us can do, whatever our life situation. We can do these things, we already do these kinds of things all the time.

These simple actions may not seem like much, but John's answer to the fearful crowd is a powerful message for us in fearful times.

When we get overwhelmed by the evil within and around us, we can share a coat.

When so many voices tell us to be afraid, we can share food.

When we're tempted to say that people with certain beliefs or political convictions are chaff and need to be burned away, we're reminded to not bully others.

When we feel urgency about the state of the world, we can do small things in our daily life, no matter our job or life situation.

The actions John prescribes for us sound simple, but they can have a profound impact on us. They give us something to do to resist the power of fear. They open us up to other people. As we're opened up, light gets in to help more good fruit to grow within us. We're also brought into relationship with other people and it is in relationship with others that we're confronted with our own anger, bigotry and indifference. As that happens, God works in us to cut out and burn away the weeds and the chaff.

These simple actions also remind us that repentance and our relationship with God are never just private, devotional things. Our personal faith is not for us alone but for the sake of the neighbor.

This time of year, we often focus on service and giving to others.

Sometimes we wonder if these simple actions are even worth it. Do they really do any good? Are they just ways of making ourselves feel better? John says no, these basic things matter for how we live in this time.

This is not to say that these small actions bring in God's kingdom or that we should be complacent thinking we can do a few more random acts of kindness and everything will be good. These actions are to be paired with repentance, with turning to God and asking God to work in us.

Yet as we look to God to come and bring in the kingdom, these actions are some of the ways that God works in us and through us.

This Advent and this Christmas, may we join in simple acts of service and love; and may we know God's purifying, renewing presence with us and with our world.