

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Art of Living: Baptism (part 2)

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
August 21, 2011

Scripture Reading: Luke 3:1-22 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I want to focus on the question people are asking John, "What can we do?" because that's probably the most poignant question that I hear these days in the ministry. People look out at what's happening in the world and feel overwhelmed. And if they close the blinds they feel guilty. If they open the blinds they feel overwhelmed. What do we do when we see the world in the state that it is? I think before we can answer that question, "what are we to do", there is a prior question we have to answer, and we sometimes forget to ask that question. That question is "Who am I?" When we are overwhelmed by the choices before us, sometimes a prior question to "what should we do about this?" is "What is a human being, who is a human being in the world?" I think the role of John is to take people to that place.

Those of you who were raised in the Presbyterian Church have probably been through something called confirmation class. Confirmation class, at least the way they taught me, did not tell you who you are as a human being. You learned dates, you learned names of dead people, and a lot of really helpful stuff about far away places and long-dead people. My confirmation class never asked the question "Who am I?" I was a philosophy major at UT. The question was never asked. I went to Seminary and the question "Who is a human being in the world?" was never asked. Kind of an important question. It precedes most of the other questions that keep us up at night.

What we are doing in this sermon series is to look at the sacraments, but not as magical rituals. Putting water on a baby's head isn't going to change anything if *we* are not different. What it is supposed to do is have *us* look at this child differently...very, very differently. Last week we looked at infant baptism. Next week we are going to look at ordination, which is not just for preachers. All of us have a path that we choose in life - one specific path. It may have a lot of detours, routes, and things. I believe that a barber who loves people and wants them to feel good, and look good, is just as called as a clergy person is, maybe more so. You have all known people who were in their niche and they did something that didn't look religious and it touched you spiritually and that's what this ritual of ordination should lead us to. In between accepting life - that we are a gift, we are the beloved one - between that and ordination, which is when you give your life to the world, is adult baptism. The ritual there is to realize and remember who a human being is in the world. You don't just do that once, right? If you have only been born again once, you are probably not having a very exciting life going for you. We make

mistakes, we stumble, we fall, and we need something that takes us back to the core. This is a question we cannot answer from the outside in. Who you are is not something [on the] outside that you did. It can be helpful to bring you to the threshold of that, but it has to come from the inside out. This is where the art comes in, the ritual comes in. It's an inner teaching. You are not memorizing facts, you are getting in touch with your own roots.

The problem in the symbol that Luke is giving here is that John the Baptist is such an overpowering figure, that we lose the punch line here. John the Baptist is such a strange person that it is really hard to get what is being talked about here. I do this all the time, I think one of the great flaws I have as a preacher is I think of much better illustrations than the point I am trying to make, a really flashy illustration and people leave talking about the illustration and not remembering what the point was. Luke apparently had that problem too because when he told the story, he made the figures so interesting that sometimes you forget what the symbol stood for. John the Baptist is a very strange bird. I picture him as this crazy guy out in the desert yelling at people. "You brood of vipers." That is not good PR. That is probably not going to build a real big mega church. The image I have is...remember that scene in Monty Python's *Holy Grail*? The guy [that's always asking] "What's your name, what's your quest?" Just that really strange, kind of scary figure. I think Luke had a good sense of humor because this is one of the funniest lines in all of scripture. John says "You pack of snakes, the axe is already laid at the roots, the winnowing fan is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary that the chaff will be burnt in unquenchable fire" and get this, "using exhortations like this John proclaimed the good news to the people." (*laughter*) How do you think he brought bad news? (*laughter*) Pretty funny.

Here's the thing. I believe Jesus came to teach love, not religion, wasn't Presbyterian, wasn't Catholic, wasn't Christian. He taught pure love, pure love. What's going to happen when we take up that teaching is, in our immaturity, we think it means whatever we want it to mean. So John is the one who has to disillusion us, has to have us let go of our childish views of the world to realize how radical the message of Jesus is.

Have you ever been off balance and somebody was trying to help you and it felt like they were attacking you? They are trying to help you find your balance, but you were so off balance that it felt like an attack. When we fall into a trance, somebody trying to wake us up may feel like an enemy. I think that's the unfortunate role that John the Baptist had to play. Before we can understand a message of universal compassion, we have to realize how we are hurting each other. The church is more than willing to take that part of the equation out. Right? The church wants to fit into the culture. The church wants to serve the empire. That's why the bishops are right next to the kings and the queen in chess. That's where the perks are. We play golf with them, get to bless the legislature when they get together. John probably didn't get invited to a lot of those things because he asked people how they were treating each other. It sounds very horrible, but when people ask "what can we do?" he says things like "Do you have two coats? How 'bout sharing?" So he isn't attacking us, he isn't being hateful. He is showing how far we fall from what Jesus is going to call us to. John was born in luxury. According to the story, he was born

into the priesthood. His dad was a priest. He could have ridden that one all the way, lived near the temple, served, and it begins that way. Remember the story of Christmas when the two babies come together and John the Baptist sees the ultrasound of Jesus and does a little dance in there? But then in this story it's very different. We see this strange person living out in the desert yelling, wearing camel hair clothes, eating grasshoppers, not real appealing. Sometimes it takes those moments in the desert before we can give up those childish images of what a human being is, who we are, what the world is.

I've told this story before, but it is really the only example I could think to illustrate this. When I was getting ready to graduate from college, I had a lot of musical possibilities open to me, a lot of acting things that were open, possibly philosophy, teaching of philosophy. My dreams were coming true. Now I'm walking along one evening and, probably a teenager comes up behind me in a car, I never saw who it was, and decided to play chicken. I'm walking about 3 feet from the curb and they are going to make me jump, except that I don't. I just keep walking. They swerved, which was good, that's why I'm able to walk today. But then, afterwards, I asked myself that question, "Why didn't I move?" Did my life mean so little to me that it wasn't worth preserving? Here's what I realized. All of my childhood dreams were coming true, but they didn't really mean anything to me. They weren't coming from my roots. They weren't the gift that I most wanted to give the world. I realized that *sometimes you have to lose your dreams to find your vision*. The vision comes from inside of you, deep inside. Sometimes the dream is what somebody else wants for you or what you think that you want. What John is trying to do is destroy your dreams so you can find your vision. It feels like an attack, like ugliness, but it is absolutely necessary to the life of compassion. To answer the question "What should we do?" We want to know what we can do. What John forces us to do is ask another question. "Who are you?" Not in the Freudian sense, like what is your personality, what's the Id, what's the Ego? But who is a human being? Who are you as a human being in the world? When you answer that question, the rest is going to get clear very quickly or at least you will know how to take the next step.

John who seems so ugly and hateful says that all humankind will see the salvation of God. Have you ever noticed that before? [That passage] doesn't get preached much, does it? All humankind will find the salvation of God. You only get to that depth in the desert. In the desert with no perks, you realize that you have a dream for all humanity. When John gives his message, he says the mountains will be lowered, the valleys will be raised. This is a very disturbing political message. If you are from the Tea party, you may want to cover your ears. When Jesus begins his ministry, and what John is talking about here is redistribution of the goods. You may not like it, but that's the message. The mountains are the powerful and the rich and the valleys are the weak and the poor. You cannot have love in the world when you have too great a discrepancy between those two. He says that our calling is to build a path out into the wilderness where all the people have been rejected and thrown away – to build a path and make it straight for them.

Now what the church has done is try to straighten the people, right? We'll go out and straighten everybody else up. That's not what this is saying. It is saying completely,

radically, revamp your theology so it includes everybody and reaches out to everybody, at least in principle. That's not to say everybody is going to say "yes" to it. A church that holds requirements that exclude people of any sort unnecessarily has not understood what John is calling us to. In his day, circumcision was how you became an insider. That excludes roughly half the people in this room – rough estimate. It privileges males over females. John, in moving from circumcision to baptism, is universalizing the entrance requirement. Furthermore, he says just because you are Jewish does not mean that you are understanding what Abraham was talking about, or Moses. Just because they are in your lineage does not mean you are true to their spirit. It doesn't do us any good to critique people from 2,000 years ago. The message is for us today. Do not think because you are American that you are better than somebody else. Do not think that because you are Christian you are better than somebody else. That is how we update the message when you see those names (previously read). I wasn't just having the names read to make Ileen have to stumble over words, she did a great job. What you learn in seminary is to just say it (pronunciation of Biblical names), look smug enough, and everyone thinks you pronounced it right. *(laughter)* That's the secret if you ever wanted to know the secret. Just don't stop or they will turn on you like dogs. *(laughter)*

If we update those images and say: "In the third year of Obama, when Rick Perry was the governor of the land," If you list the leaders of today you will understand in a heartbeat what they are talking about when they say "the high places have got to be lowered and the low places raised." The reason they killed John the Baptist is not because of religious reasons, it's because he threatened privilege. The reason they killed Jesus was not that he was so nice, it was because he threatened privilege. His message was radical from the core. To say a human being owes allegiance to everyone in the whole world is radical. People came to him. Someone who worked in the tax department, he said OK, just don't use that to get rich. A soldier comes to him, he says just don't bully people. Don't use your station to build up your own power. But you get that all of us have a challenge and a calling. Go to that little place where we have our choices. We feel so helpless, but we are not. Use the little choices you have to teach the big lesson in the world. Demonstrate your universal humanity in the little choices you have in the week ahead and it will begin to do the work, to build the road for people in the future. The problem is when you think you have to do it in your lifetime. What John the Baptist is saying is, no matter how helpless you feel you can do something to pave the road for this message into the future. It looks like a criticism but it's very hopeful and very helpful. You have two coats, do the math. The Tea party is wrong, desperately, despicably wrong. The purpose of a human being is not to hoard as much as we can, it's to make it a family of the whole world. That's what every human heart longs to do.

What are we to do? Obviously, each of us has to answer that question in our own way in the week ahead. I think if we ask the right question first, "Who are we?" If we take that question into the desert, when you are sick and can't get better, when a relationship is broken and you can't heal it, those are the best times to deepen your humanity. When times are good, enjoy them. Seek joy. When times are bad, seek wisdom. Seek depth. The desert is the best place for these things to go from the inside out. The joy that you get from that will be greater than you have for living for yourself. The first baptism is for

you to realize that you are a blessing to the world. Your life is a gift. But the second baptism teaches that to hold on to that joy, you have to give your life away. The role of John the Baptist is to teach something that none of us wants to learn, which is that sometimes, we have to lose our dreams to find our vision.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,

Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,

Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:

believers and agnostics,
conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
women and men,
those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
those of all races and cultures,
those of all classes and abilities,
those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;

Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,

Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,

Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:

striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,

Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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