



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 16, 2018

LUKE 3: 7-18  
“FROM TWO TO ONE”

He said therefore 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 in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to 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 shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. 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 barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

- The short version is that after college I went to Los Angeles and made a bad living as a musician. Bad, like that old joke: what do you call a musician who loses his girlfriend?
- Homeless.
- It wasn't that bad, because eventually I found a job that paid the bills. Managing a record store about two blocks south of the sunset strip.

- I usually closed out the store, so it was late at night before i headed to my apartment in Venice Beach. One night, I was stopped by the police because a rear light was out and they took my license while I waited in my car.
- Suddenly, another cruiser pulled in and I was being asked to step out of my car, put my hands on the car, and asked whether or not I had any weapons.
- Now this was in the dinosaur days before computers so all the police knew was that there was an outstanding warrant for me and they didn't know what it was for. Heck, I didn't know what it was for.
- But they weren't taking any chances. They handcuffed me and put me in the back of the cruiser and off we went to the Venice jail.
- Now Venice Beach has always been a colorful place, full of all kinds of characters, eccentrics, and people who color outside the lines. You've likely seen a shot of Venice Beach in any number of movies set in Los Angeles. Weight lifters on the beach, roller bladers in bikinis, and those are just the men. I was worried that the jail would be a bit weird.
- After getting to the police station, i am photographed and fingerprinted. And I find out the warrant is for a car I had abandoned a year before because I didn't have money for repairs. When I said I was making a bad living, I'm not kidding. I didn't what do I do with a car that no longer worked and needed major repairs.
- My decision got me an outstanding warrant....
- God loves animals and idiots, and since I'm not a dog or cat, you know what I am. My two roommates happened to be in law school at UCLA so, after jokingly telling me they were going to let me stay there overnight, they came down to the jail and got me out.
- This is just one highlight of my life, but it gave me an important perspective which figures into this morning's sermon....
- Last week we began looking at John the Baptist, trying to figure out why the ancient church gives us two Sundays of this odd character.
- His old, longstanding approach to religion is about to give way to a new approach in Jesus. And nothing new comes easily or without resistance. We've lived through that here at clc.

- John's approach is the old ego-centered religion.
- That doesn't mean it's bad. Just means there's something more. There's a next step. There's a more mindful way of viewing things.
- When we look at John and his teaching, we might miss the obvious. And the obvious is that in all three examples that John gives, there are two involved.
  - The one with two tunics and the one with none.
  - The tax collector and the one from whom taxes are collected.
  - The soldier and the one over whom he has power.
- What John is doing is raising our awareness: about the haves and the have-nots. About those with power and those without. About taking care of the less fortunate.
- This is about ethical behavior. But it doesn't go far enough. Plus, there is something flawed in the perspective.
- The problem is in the **two**.
- Whenever we have two, we have divided reality into opposites.
- Now we cannot help but do this. In part, this is what the story in the Garden of Eden is about. Describing the human condition that creates two.
- What happens when Adam and Eve's eyes are opened? Well, they now see that one fruit is better than this other fruit. This fruit is good for eating and that fruit bestows knowledge. And knowledge of what? The difference between good and evil. And when their eyes are opened, they then know they are naked. So now they are aware of the difference between being clothed and being naked. And when they hear God walking in the garden, they become aware of the difference between serenity and fear. And right and wrong. And, eventually, being in the garden and not being in the garden. All having to do with **two**.
- ....here's where psychology helps us with our spiritual lives.
- What we've discovered is that as long as we're in a *John the Baptist mindset of two*, it is virtually impossible not to end up with an air of superiority if you're the one on the giving end. If the other is the one in need, you're not. If the other one of the two is

without, then you got it. It's hard not to be condescending, a little smug, a bit patronizing. Hard not to get a bit self-righteous which, for Jesus is the unforgivable sin.

- And then we make judgments about the other and a distance grows between us. Somehow their humanity is not quite the same as ours. There is "us" and then there are the other people. A thousand "we-theys." And, in the current political climate, the differences have become lethal....
- I've mentioned before, Deb's and my house in Bloomington was two houses away from the old railroad tracks. And in every city, there is the right and wrong side of the tracks. And we were, just barely, on the right side of the tracks. The east side, not the west side. It was largely white on the east side, not so on the west side. And when someone got shot in the house just across the tracks. Oh boy, our house lost value overnight.
- So, when I'm living in LA and I don't have money to fix my car and I'm not going to have money to fix my car and I need to leave it by the side of the road and I stand handcuffed by my car with the police getting nervous about my outstanding warrant and I'm in the back of a cruiser and I'm getting fingerprinted, the world looks quite different. I'm on the wrong side of the tracks.
- But I've got a few things going for me. I'm white. I've got friends with some juice.
- But, if I'm a person of color and I don't have friends in law school? It's a different ballgame, altogether.
- The world looks different from the bottom than it does from the top. Again, the difference in the two.
- As much as John the Baptist looks like a wild man, he's part of the old order. He's telling people to share and play fair. He still sounds like someone who thinks it will all work out fine if everyone just follows the rules. But the rules usually work for those who make the rules.
- When we're young and naïve, we buy the party line. Work hard, keep your nose clean, and you'll get ahead. Tell that to the thousands of gm workers laid off weeks before the holidays.
- Life is fair. Don't make me laugh.

- The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Do you know that the 1% in this country have never been inside a grocery store? Someone shops for them.
- Intuitively, John knows his approach is meager and faulty, no matter how ethical or moral it sounds.
- “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” **See how he’s still dividing into two?**
- I think we need a story to help get us into the change in mindset coming in Jesus.
- One day, the father of a wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country for the purpose of showing him how poor people live. They spent a couple days and nights on the farm of what were considered a very poor family.
- On their way home, the father asked the son, “how was the trip?”
- “It was great, dad.”
- “Did you see how poor people live?”
- “Yes, yes I did.”
- “So, tell me, what did you learn from the trip?”
- The son answered, “I saw that we have one dog and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end in sight. We have lanterns in our garden and they have millions of stars at night. We have a small piece of land and they have fields that go on forever. People serve us and they serve others. We buy food and they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us and they have friends who watch over them.”
- The boy’s father was speechless. Then his son added, “thanks dad, for showing me how poor we are....”
- Jesus turns the table on what is up and what is down; who is on top and who is on the bottom. He erases the difference and introduces the Kingdom of God where **the two become one.**
- “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”

- “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” No self-consciousness. No splitting the world into two.
- “On that day you will realize that I am in my father and you are in me and I am in you.” All one.
- “There is no longer Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ.”
- The image always before us is the holy suffering one, nailed to the cross of his existence displaying that pain does not differentiate between rich and poor, Christian and Buddhist, black and white, the giver and receiver.
- Jesus makes the two one. We are all spiritual beings trying to be human and frankly, none of us are doing that great a job, which is just fine because it takes a long lifetime to try to work it out. And that’s why we’re here, isn’t it?
- As I’ve mentioned, I grew up in the first integrated Lutheran church in the country. When I was about ten, we had a young black man who would show up at worship at any and all times. He was mentally challenged and always dressed in a nice black suit with white shirt and tie.
- But he would wander in during the sermon or during a hymn—never at the beginning of worship—and just mosey up and down the aisles and all around. One of the ushers would quietly try to corral him, but he would easily dodge them and keep up his meanderings.
- I thought it was a riot. I would get dirty looks from my Dad because I would be giggling in the pews and elbowing my sister.
- We were a high liturgical Church with Communion every Sunday even back in those days. And it was very formal. Ushers, in their suits, standing at the front of the sanctuary where the steps led up to the Communion rail, taking communion cards from people and helping the elderly up the steps. No one communed before being confirmed at the end of ninth grade and I knew there were debates about whether the mentally challenged could even take communion.

- One Sunday, this young man decided to wander on up to the Communion rail, sidestepping the ushers who were frozen in place and so he went by them and knelt at the communion rail.
- Now our pastor, born, raised and trained in Germany, was an incredible intellectual. Well-known throughout the country, testifying before congress, working with some of the brightest civil rights and politically active people around. As different from this young black man as night and day.
- I found myself holding my breath. What would Pastor Bernhard do? He wasn't a member. Certainly, he hadn't been confirmed. He was of limited intellect.
- Pastor Bernhard came to him and, without pause, bent over, "the body of Christ given for you." With dignity and blessing and care in his gestures and words.
- Looking back, decades later, I realize I was that young black man. Wondering about my own worth. Feeling like an awkward outsider. Feeling as though I didn't really fit anywhere. Wandering around my own life not knowing who I was or if I had anything worthwhile to offer.
- And maybe if Pastor Bernhard saw value in that broken young man, there might just be value in me, too.
- The Church of Jesus Christ is meant to be the community of outsiders who have come inside. The awkward, the lonely, the hurting, the needy, the lost, the worthless, the wandering, the searching, the broken. **All one.** What unites us is the outsider in us all—outsiders now on the inside.
- Even if we've put it together on the outside and are "successful," don't we all know what it is to be the walking wounded, the lonely losers, the stupid kid in Los Angeles getting picked up for abandoning his car, the one at the bottom, the outsider wandering around the Sanctuary.
- We're all one. In Christ.
- **SOMETIMES I CRY** by Jason Crabb