

“A TIME FOR QUESTIONS”

Luke 3:7-18

Third Sunday in Advent (December 13), 2009

Here we are on the Third Sunday of Advent. We've taken time to observe the signs, and we've taken time to prepare our hearts. Today we're taking time for questions. Actually, if we're trying to be completely accurate, we're taking time for a question...just one...but in our reading it's a question that is asked three times by three different groups of people. This morning, we're going to explore the question, “What should we do?”

I have to admit, that in 17 years of preaching – which means that I've probably faced this text six times – I've not looked at this text from this angle. Most often (and I don't think I'm alone), I've spoken about John the Baptist's message of repentance. But this question, “What should we do?” demonstrates the fruit of repentance.

If we define repentance as a turn-around in behaviors or attitudes of which God would not approve, then the question is a necessary one. Let's look at the text to see what I mean.

The passage begins with John addressing the crowds that came to be baptized by him. When we look at the same story in the gospel of Matthew, John is speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees. It would be easy to see why he would be so angry with these groups of people. While they were devout in their religious talk, they fell short in their religious walk. They lived lives that were often viewed as hypocritical – they didn't practice what they preached. To use the language from James, they had faith but not works (and you know what they say about faith without works – it's like a screen door on a submarine).

But in Luke, we find John addressing the crowds, the multitudes. Luke wants his readers to understand that John's message was for the whole nation. His message, full of judgment, begins with a condemnation of his hearers as a “brood of vipers” trying to flee “the wrath to come.” The wrath of God is an important topic in both the Old and the New Testaments. It stresses the divine hostility to all evil. Within this judgment we find “the ax lying at the root of the trees.” While the trees are not yet cut down, the warning is clear.

John also warns his audience against relying on their ancestry. While the Jews were apt to think that God would ultimately be kind to them because of Abraham's merits and God's promise to Abraham and his descendents, John reminds them that we stand before God as individuals – on our own merits.

With that in mind, the crowds ask John, “What should we do?” The people – whether they came to this conclusion on their own, or were scared into it – wanted to know what was expected of them. John's first answer is profoundly practical: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” In other words, people should share what they have with those who have little or nothing.

Sound familiar? It's a message that still rings true today. In this place of God we call the United Methodist Church of Willmar, we seek to offer multiple opportunities to share what we have with those who have little. During the month of December, we're collecting funds to share with the Salvation Army, who will in turn, share them with people who need help with their food, clothing, or shelter needs. We're also collecting gifts for the Shelter House, a safe place for women and their children who have experienced domestic violence or homelessness. All month long we've been collecting birthday bags for the Food Shelf. Downstairs is a hat and mitten tree (which also has a few scarves on it), and out in the lobby are baskets that have been lovingly filled with donated goodies that are ready to be delivered to members and friends of the church. Later this month, we'll be serving two Community Meals, offering a free meal to anyone who shows up – no questions asked. It's likely that we'll serve over 400 people between Christmas Day and the Sunday that follows. And to think, this is just one month out of the year!

“What should we do?” Turn away from selfishness and pride and arrogance and a ‘me-first’ attitude, and share what we have with those who have little or nothing.

Giving is an especially evident fruit of repentance. It shows that we understand who has really given to us. It indicates that we know that God gave God's one and only son to be born in our world of sin. It reveals our understanding that the Son of God gave his own life on the cross so that our sins might be forgiven. Giving is God's way and that is the way our fruit of repentance can be demonstrated, too.

But John wasn't finished – the tax collectors coming to him to be baptized were asking the same question, “What should we do?”

In Jesus' day, the Romans taxed people by farming out the taxing rights to the highest bidder. The successful collector would pay Rome the amount he would bid, but then he would collect more than that to pay his expenses and gain his legitimate profit. It was a strong temptation to levy even more tax than was strictly necessary and to pocket the extra. This provoked resentment, especially among the loyal, who didn't like to see Jews helping the Romans by collecting their taxes for them.

A vicious circle developed: the more they overtaxed the more they were hated and the more they were hated the more they were overtaxed. The tax collectors who came to be baptized by John had somehow been convinced that what they were doing was wrong. They wanted to express their repentance through baptism, but they also wanted to know what else they should be doing. Notice that John doesn't tell them to quit their profession and become a monk. He only admonishes that they keep their profession free from greed and self-gratification. Do the work assigned, collect the correct amount, but no more. Treat the people with respect and don't seek to line your own pockets, which is what many of the tax collectors did.

I see in this example, a message against greed. How often do we think we ought to receive more than an honest day's pay for an honest day's work? How many times do we look at what we've been given and ask, "Is that it?" Or how often has someone come to us and apologized for something they've said or done, and we think to ourselves (or even say it out loud), "That's not good enough," or "I need more than that."

"What should we do?" Turn away from greed, and expect and collect only what is due."

The last group addressed by John is the soldiers. Our scripture doesn't say that they came first for baptism, but we could guess that the conversation follows a similar pattern that begins with that act. Luke doesn't tell us whether the soldiers were Jewish or Roman. Most agree that they were Jewish, and some think they may have been associated with the tax collectors in providing the backing which enabled them to do their work. Either way they were in a privileged position over the general public. Citizens would have little recourse when troops used violence or false accusations to rob them.

To these soldiers, John was similarly down to earth. He didn't ask them to leave their bloody work, but to do it with professionalism. Soldiers were notorious for using their brute force to advance their own salary. John wanted them to remember that God was in charge and that God's commands were more important than that of their own sinful hearts or of their evil earthly commanders.

The message for us here is similar – treat other with respect. Don't use force or intimidation to get something that doesn't belong to us. Along those same lines, we ought to be content with what God has given us. Remember "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." And seek always to follow God's way - God's will - rather than our own. I'm reminded of Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

"What should we do?" Look to God for guidance, and when it comes, follow it.

In these days of Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, John's message is as necessary for us as it was for the crowds and the tax collectors and the soldiers. "What should we do?" Let us keep our lives producing the fruit of repentance so that Christmas will continue for the whole year and every year instead of just for a few days this year. **AMEN.**