

12-13-09 sermon by Rev. Jim Craven

A few years ago there was a popular book, the title of which was something along the lines of Everything I Need to Know in life I Learned in Kindergarten. And there is more than a grain of truth in that. We learn to play fairly and interact with others. We learn to share. Not to hog everything for ourselves. We learn to say "please" and "thank you." We learn to think of others. We learn to help others and not hurt them. We learn not to bunt with two strikes. Now, granted, some of these may be life-long learning efforts, but the seed is planted early.

I thought of this when I read the Gospel account of John the Baptist we just heard from Luke. Half of what John tells us more or less falls into that category. Stuff we learned or should have learned long, long ago. And interestingly, that middle portion we hear only in Luke, though the opening and closing segments are repeated in Matthew, or perhaps taken from Matthew. "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none." We need John the Baptist to tell us this? Surely not. But we are human. We enjoy nice things and we forget. So a reminder never hurts. A gentle reminder at least. "He who has food, let him do likewise. Share it with the hungry guy who has none." That makes sense. It's hard to argue with. We take up a food offering here at every service. We keep food pantries filled. We deliver meals on wheels about which there is more at the Alternative Gifts Fair across the way. We are attuned to the needs of the hungry in our community. Surely we don't need John the Baptist to remind of that very elementary and human obligation.

Again, though, a reminder never hurts. And while we do an all right job of feeding the hungry on a local level, hunger remains an enormous problem world wide and in parts of our own country. The worst poverty I have ever personally encountered in the United States was in an Indian community in the state of Maine. And we know that hunger is endemic in much of Africa. You do not have venture far from the splendor of Table Mountain at Cape Town to find shanty towns of the most primitive sort. Nor are the Soweto townships very far from uptown Johannesburg. And in parts of the world, governments and war lords and lawless armed militia keep food from reaching those who need it most. Think, for example, of the hungry in North Korea, in Gaza, and in the Darfur area of Sudan. We are told there is plenty of food in the world. That the problem is distribution. Should the surplus greeneries perhaps be emptied? Should corporate farmers be paid not to grow food? Should Japanese long-line fishing be banned? There was no shortage of fish in the oceans before the advent of the 20-mile long fishing line with thousands of hooks. And that's no exaggeration. They really are 20 miles long. Should the United Nations, as its charter permits, perhaps have a standing army to make sure that adequate food supplies get to the hungry of the world? Should indigenous farming be sacrificed to the market for teak furniture made from wood from the world's rainforests?

There has throughout history been this dichotomy. Bread or circuses? Guns or butter? Oil or food? So maybe we are reading John the Baptist too literally and simplistically. Maybe we need to take what John the Baptist has to say about human need and apply it not only to our personal habits, but to the world, in the halls of Congress, at the United Nations and wherever children of whatever age go to bed hungry.

While John reminds us of those lessons we cannot forget, but have yet to fully master, it is no gentle reminder. Notice how he begins, not with a warm welcome to the riverside, nor with a humorous story or two to warm up the audience. This man, John, had neither tact nor diplomacy among his gifts. So he began with the harangue, "You brood of vipers. Don't come here telling me you are good religious folks. Children of Abraham. Every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." In other words, do good if you want to avoid that treatment.

John, in this way, I think, sort of previews for us the faith-works. intellectual-theological battle between James and Paul. You may remember -- and if you don't, there's no extra charge this morning -- that Paul emphasized the priority of faith over works, justification by faith alone. James said, in effect, that our faith ought to produce good works. That it isn't quite enough to say to the frozen child in the snow, "Be warm and peace be with you." Both were right in their own way. Yet no less than Martin Luther called the book of James an epistle of straw.

John the Baptist, who could never have made a living as an after dinner speaker, wound up his recitation of the Good News by telling the folks, that brood of vipers -- at least those who hadn't already walked out on him -- that the Messiah is coming. And is he ever going to clean house when he gets here. Now surely some heard John, took his words to heart and genuinely turned their lives around which is what repentance mean, to turn your life around. John's rather fearsome approach, though, could turn a child away from ice cream. Far better the far gentler approach of his first cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth we await 12 days on.

Jesus, too, though could and did employ the mechanism of tough love on occasion as in his one recorded act of violence when he threw the money changers out of the temple. Jesus also exemplified the Messiah foretold by the prophet Zephaniah who wrote 600 years before the birth of the Christ child and was rather more healing in his approach than John the Baptist. As we heard earlier, "The Lord has taken away the judgment against you. Do not fear. The Lord is in your midst. He will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in his love. I will remove disaster from you. I will bring you home." The prophet Zephaniah was not blind to our faults, 2600 years ago or now. And they are much the same for sin and human nature have changed little. And yet his words are the words of healing we cannot hear too often, particularly at this time of year.

For this is a season, a time of year, when hunger is more acute, when suicide and homicide rates are up, when banks are robbed to provide Christmas presents for family, when loneliness and grief well nigh overwhelm us, when we want to go home, wherever that is and it's where they have to let us in.

My father's been dead now almost 35 years, but I miss him perhaps most at this time of year because of a story he always told. I always picture him at what was my first Christmas as a baby eating Spam and Japanese rice on Guadalcanal, feverish from malaria and crying shamelessly, as he put it, as he heard on scratchy short-wave radio -- courtesy of Tokyo Rose -- Bing Crosby singing White Christmas.

Whatever our worries are in this Advent, be they family, work, financial, medical, war and peace, emotional, romantic, you name it, I think what we most want is to be held and loved and valued as a child of God. To be told -- now take a deep breath and then exhale -- it's going to be all right. And so often, that is God's healing, loving message for us. And it is, I suggest, also the message of the miraculous birth at Bethlehem we will celebrate soon. Remember that maybe above all else we as the church, the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ, are in the healing business. Healing not only of body and mind, but of spirit and broken relationships, healing among nations and tribes and healing in this holy place. And most of that healing takes place out of here. We come here to be fueled and energized to go out into the world and do that work of healing in hospitals and prisons, on ships and in airplanes, out on the highways and whenever two or three are gathered together.

Paul, who notwithstanding his differences with James and who was often as tactful, gentle and diplomatic as John the Baptist, gave us I think just what we may all need in these frenetic days in what we heard earlier from his letter to the Philippians. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Amen.