

Sunday, December 12, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

A Dangerous Love

INTRODUCTION

Today's Gospel reading is from Luke 3:7-18, found on page 60 in your pew Bibles.

Last week we read the beginning of Luke's account of John the Baptist. You remember that seemingly out of nowhere, John is spotted along the banks of the Jordan River, urgently preaching about repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" Quoting the Prophet Isaiah, he yells out. "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." You can bet that word spread quickly about this eccentric man, dressed in camel hair, splashing around in the river, eating only locust and honey. His eccentricity however didn't matter nearly as much as his long-awaited message of hope. Like a ship's look-out who at long last sights land, John is eager to announce this good news; the God of rescue is on the move...prepare yourselves!

John's message was thrilling. The people were well familiar with Isaiah's words promising God's liberation and had been waiting for a long time for the promised messiah to arrive. It gave a weary and despondent people new hope, a doorway to forgiveness, and the chance to reconcile with a God that many had left behind years ago.

The buzz about quickly goes viral. In a world of oppressive predictability and regimented routine, John the Baptist is the hottest ticket in town. Everyone eagerly makes their way to the river, not only religious Jews, but also Roman soldiers, despised tax collectors, and curious onlookers. They all flocked to the Jordan. Who knows what this guy will say or do next?

Seated across the river, John sees this massive audience building and building. Has he become a spectacle for their amusement? Who do they think he is? Does anyone truly understand the historic significance of what God is about to do?

John stood up. The crowds that came out to be baptized by him fell silent under his gaze. Then he said...

SCRIPTURE

John said 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 worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at 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 should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we,

what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. 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 granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

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

The Word of God for the people of God.

SERMON *A Dangerous Love*

GOOD NEWS? You brood of vipers? The ax is at the tree? Burning chaff with unquenchable fire? Yikes! Welcome to the Advent Sunday of Love! Merry Christmas to you too John (the buzz kill) Baptist! Why do you suppose Luke wrote that John's message was good news to these people he just verbally shredded? Let's take a closer look. Maybe we can uncover hidden treasure when we view this scripture through the lens of love.

Let us pray...

God of all our hope, provider of all peace, This morning we come before you to find warmth together in the light of Your love. Like John the Baptist, we have often felt so misunderstood and even unloved, but today, in this place of worship, we sink deeply into the love that begins in You. Bless us now with openness, insight, courage and resolve, so that we may agents of your love, here on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Without a doubt, the most intimidating group I have ever faced has been the young teenagers in confirmation class. In the first few gatherings, they come mostly because they are mandated by the supreme court of parental insistence, under threat or a promised bribe. I stand in front of a hostile room full of intelligent, informed, articulate malcontents, ready to let me know why religion and everything associated with it is the source of all pain and suffering in the world. As emotionally challenging as it is, I actually look forward to these meetings because, if I can distance myself from the cynical barbs and firmly fixed attitudes, and just listen to what is underneath the defiance, I generally hear insightful observations and real engagement with the material.

For instance, one evening I was talking about the significance of baptism. "The Christian baptism," I said, "is one of the ways that Jesus reveals God's extravagant Love."

From the back of the class a young man, slouched in his chair, staring at his feet with his hood pulled around his head says, "That's not what it means."

This was the first time he had spoken at any of our classes. I was a bit stunned and asked, "What do you think it means?"

"The story says that the heavens were opened up, right?"

"That's what I read." I said.

The boy looked up at me, removed his hood, looked me straight in the eye and said, "It means that God is loose in the world. And that is dangerous."

You could have knocked me down with a feather. How many of us think about Love, unleashed on the world as a dangerous thing? But he was so right on! Love is dangerous, because when our identity is centered exclusively on our own well-being over or against the well-being of others and we see ourselves as more important or worthy than those on the margins, Love will threaten us. Love is dangerous because it insists on equality, mutual respect and above all, kindness. To choose Love can be downright terrifying to the ruling class. It threatens our idea of power, questions our security and scrambles our neatly ordered structure of success. When Love is unleashed in the world it means that every exploitive power system that thrives on the backs of others will be toppled. For those not in power, for the exploited and oppressed, for the marginalized losers, for the ones that Luke was writing to, this dangerous love is very good news. Love liberates captives, comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Love is the most powerful force there is. As Jesus so clearly demonstrated, Love even triumphs over death! There is no evil vicious enough, no power greater in heaven or on earth that can stand against it.

No one knows how John came to become "the Baptist." We only know that he loved God so fiercely that he was compelled to publicly call out injustice, expose hypocrisy and fearlessly speak truth to power. His love was so dangerous that the ruling elite had him arrested and eventually executed. The danger John posed was, that as he prepared the way for Jesus, his message weakened the rigidly defined walls of separation between people, class and cultures. His astounding revelation was that God's Love was for all people, not only children of Abraham. Even enemies of the Jewish community, such as traitorous tax collectors and Roman soldiers, were invited into John's baptism. Anyone, he said, who was ready to turn away from self-centered, exploitive ways to choose instead a life of generosity, honesty, and respect would live in communion with God. To be baptized into the Love of God is to intentionally burn away the chaff of self-entitlement, narrow-minded exceptionalism and the brutal pursuit of power and influence. When God's Love is loose in the world, it is a dangerous thing. Love dismantles the thrones of the powerful, neutralizes hate and lifts up the lowly from their oppression.

Several years ago, following the devastating white supremacist march in Charlottesville, a similar hate group was organizing to march on the Boston Common. When that Saturday came, over fifty-thousand of us turned out for a counter protest march. Fifty-thousand people, black, white and every shade in between, young and old, gay and straight, religious and secular, we all marched down Tremont Street, in unified solidarity, to display this dangerous power of love over hate, to stand up for liberation over bondage, and equality over racist segregation. Fifty-thousand people surrounded the platform waiting for the hate group to spew their poison. We simply stood there, encircling an empty stage. It turned out that no speeches were given that day, no confrontations forced, no arrests were made. Not one white supremacist dared to stand up and oppose such a powerful show of non-violent force. That was a dangerous Love.

The urgent call from John the Baptist was to repent and behave in a new way because God was coming. And he was right! The incarnation, totally changed how God is understood and the meaning of the entire universe. God is a God of love, a love that is expressed so clearly by His becoming one of us, completely exposed and entirely vulnerable to every horror the world knows. God willingly shared our experience, felt our pain and suffered the consequences of Love. Jesus confronted the evil of this world and knows our struggle. In the end, it turns out that God can save our weary souls, but not simply through a legalistic transaction whereby our sins are forgiven. Jesus showed us something new, something astonishing. Jesus showed us how to join the Divine nature with our nature, just as it was always meant to be. This is the remarkable and unlikely story that begins with Christmas. At Christmas we once again affirm that God is alive and we see clearly the pure beauty of a God who is only Love. In the Christmas story we see that Love is the force that, against all evidence, pulls us forward in believing there is a better day. Love is what motivates us to work our tiny yet critical part in achieving that better day. This is by no means easy to do. We often fail and retreat. We are a work in progress. But those who know the power of forgiveness have learned to trust the power of God, the power of Love. The forgiven have learned that it is always and only Love that can heal the broken places and ignite that Divine spark, that Divine spark, imbedded every one of us, can never die. It resides in every being, waiting to be ignited and lived out.

Like all prophets, John exposed the hypocrisy of pretentious religion and self-justification. He holds a mirror up to us and says, "See? You are killing yourself! Go a different way, be a different person, repent and let love guide you toward liberation." This is never easy and generally we want to turn away from the stark light of our unvarnished reflection. But holding our discomfort we become aware that this is the way we prepare to meet Jesus. When we have the courage to admit that we are not the hero of our story and confront the messy filth that disguises our true soul, we discover the trailhead leading to our true destiny. We come to realize that there is no path you can go down, no hole you can dig yourself into that is deep enough that God can't reach you and whisper, "Let's begin again." Because God is only Love, redemption is always possible. Grace lies in waiting for our confession and it is then that we experience the true power of Love.

For John, to Love as God Loves is the universal imperative that will save the world, and he knows that Love incarnate is about to arrive. John knows that the One who is coming is the masterpiece of love in the midst of a creation designed for love but hurling into self-imposed ruin.

This is not some new-age spirituality or sentimental mysticism. To care for one another in this way is the kind of stuff we learn in kindergarten, yet it turns out that this is the most powerful lesson we learn in life. The dangerous Love of God is a hard-won surrender. Love requires us to relinquish all of our self-interest for the mutual benefit and well-being of the other. Realigned on the cosmic chiropractic table, we find that Love actually becomes second nature. Giving away a coat to someone who has none is easy, providing food for those who are hungry is just what you do. It is impossible for love to cheat clients or swindle business partners. Any influence we might have is not used for personal gain but leveraged for the mutual benefit of all, even when that means that we ourselves have to settle for less and risk our security.

There is little doubt that we live in the shadows of fear, hatred, and contempt. Yet this third week in Advent we dare to light a candle of love. And this humble flickering flame becomes a symbol of our Advent blessing; God is breaking through the darkness. God is with us and within us. God invites us to become the blessing. Harbingers of hope, peace and love in a broken, cruel and hurting world. An ongoing invitation that waits only for your assent. People get ready. Either way, God's dangerous Love is on the loose. Amen.