

## Bear Fruits Worthy of Repentance

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, December 16, 2018

Vicar Jen Moore

Gospel Text: [Luke 3:7 - 18](#)

John the Baptist must have created quite the spectacle. As readers of Luke's gospel, we know that John is special, and that he has a special mission: to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

But to the crowds assembled at the Jordan River, John is a Nobody who has appeared literally out of Nowhere. Add to that John's appearance. The other Gospels paint a picture of John as slightly wild - wearing a cloak of camel's hair and leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey. I mean, think of it - imagine you're in the parking lot at the Food Lion, and some guy comes out of the woods looking wild, wearing animal skins and shouting about repentance! Are you going to stop and listen to what he has to say, or are you going to walk quickly in the opposite direction!??

But it seems like the people do not respond the way we 21st century North Americans would. Even after he called them a bunch of snakes, they crowd around him and line up to be baptized. Perhaps John's appearance and remoteness lend him some credibility as a prophet. Some of the people living around the Jordan might have associated John with the prophet Elijah, who was [described in 2 Kings](#) as a hairy man wearing a leather belt. And for a man who has been living away from society for a number of years, John certainly has sharp insight into the experiences of the people. He knows that they have stopped caring for the entire community and are thinking only about themselves. He knows that people are not sharing their abundance. He knows that tax collectors are cheating the people. He knows that soldiers are extorting people and making false accusations against them in order to pad out their wallets. And, although our selection ends at verse 18, in verse 19 we learn that [John also calls out Herod Antipas](#) for his morally questionable relationship with his sister-in-law. For someone who has been living in the middle of Nowhere, he sure has a lot to say about Civilization.

Whatever it is about John that attracts them, the crowd stays. Apparently some of them thought that their identity as children of Abraham should be enough to save them. Maybe they are there out of curiosity, or maybe they are there because baptism will make them *look* virtuous. How many Christians, I wonder, believe that church membership excuses any and all bad behavior? How many parents bring their children to baptism because it's traditional, but never bring their children back to church? John

has news for these people - claiming an identity is not enough. John tells them they must repent and, on top of that, bear fruit worthy of that repentance.

The crowd is really and truly stumped. Three different groups - the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers - each representing different segments of society, ask, "What, then, should we do?"

John responds with concrete examples of justice and compassion. When I was reading this, I suddenly remembered a long-range planning meeting that I attended once for work. The meeting facilitator put everyone into groups, and asked them to come up with a list of so-called "S.M.A.R.T." goals. These are goals which are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely. John is giving each group S.M.A.R.T. goals. They are specific - give away your extra food and clothing, collect only the taxes that people actually owe, be satisfied with your wages. They are measurable - you will have less, while your neighbor will have enough. They are attainable - these are things that are within your power where you live and work. They are realistic - he is not asking them to change the world, just change what they are doing in their corner of it. They are timely - the time is now! One who is more powerful is coming, with winnowing fork in hand!

The message John delivers is that repentance - TRUE repentance - is not simply a matter of pretty words or verbal apologies. TRUE repentance results in a change of heart and mind. Like changing your mind about which path to take, it is a change in orientation - away from sin and towards God. In the case of his audience, TRUE repentance looks like turning away from the selfish individualism that permeated Roman-Greco culture, and turning back towards the covenant that God established for Israel, which is fundamentally rooted in the well-being of the entire community.

For John and his audience, repentance also assumes that faith is already present. You cannot turn toward a God you do not know. Theologian Charlene P.E. Burns summarizes the first two parts of John's sermon when she writes, "What we do flows from faith, expresses our repentance, and includes sharing of resources, honesty, and just treatment of those over whom we have worldly power."<sup>1</sup> If we are a truly repenting and forgiven people, our actions towards our neighbors will reflect a changed heart and concern for the well-being of the entire community.

A few years ago, the story of one death-row inmate captured the attention of the nation. In 2015, Kelly Renee Gissendaner became the first woman in 70 years to be executed by the state of Georgia. But it wasn't her gender that made headlines, it was the conversion she experienced while she was in prison. She was convicted of orchestrating the murder of her husband and sentenced to death in 1998. During her

---

<sup>1</sup> Charlene P.E. Burns, "Luke 3:7-14: Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Gospels - Luke, Volume 1: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), Kindle edition.

time in prison, Kelly began meeting with a pastor, and eventually became a Christian. Many prisoners encounter Christ in prison. Some, like those members of John's crowd who show up to be baptized for appearance's sake, claim a Christian identity because they think it will help their case. But Kelly went on to enroll in a theological degree course offered by a local cluster of seminaries. She even became pen pals with the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, who exchanged more than 20 letters with her during her time in prison and flew to the US to present her with her degree upon the completion of her theological studies.

After her conversion, Kelly became a light in the darkness around her. A fellow inmate wrote that, while she was in solitary confinement for two months, Kelly would whisper words of encouragement and offer prayers and scripture verses from her own cell three doors down. She talked women out of suicide. She shared food with fellow prisoners. A group of former inmates whose lives were impacted by Kelly have formed a community outside prison called "Struggle Sisters."<sup>2</sup> They credit Kelly with their ability to make it through incarceration, saying, "She loved us when no one else did." Now, they work towards ending mass incarceration and work for justice for other women like themselves. They, too, have had a change of heart and now work for the well-being of their entire community.

In the months leading up to her scheduled execution date, the story of Kelly's transformation and impact on others began to gain traction. Even Pope Francis urged for clemency during his visit to the United States. Kelly's story touched people because it flies in the face of everything our culture tells us about people who commit crime. Our culture tells us that criminals are fundamentally bad people, unworthy of redemption. It tells us that, even after they serve their sentences, they can't be trusted. They shouldn't have jobs or vote. They shouldn't be a part of our communities. Kelly's story offers the good news, in her own words, "that no one, not even me, is beyond redemption through God's grace and mercy."<sup>3</sup> In the middle of her wilderness, the word of God came to her, a Nobody by the world's standards, and turned her heart around. Kelly's repentance was TRUE repentance. It flowed from her faith, and bore fruit worthy of that repentance. Her actions reflected a changed heart and exposed her as a faithful follower of Christ. Kelly was saved - not from execution - but from a life of isolation, both from her neighbor and from the love of God.

Kelly's story tells us something else, something that John tells us at the end of this passage. Without Jesus, this redemption is impossible. The Holy Spirit and fire that Jesus baptizes us with burn away our old selves, *and also* turn our hearts and minds toward God and neighbor. The primary purpose of judgement is not to burn the chaff - it

---

<sup>2</sup> "About," Struggle Sisters Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/strugglesistersunite](http://www.facebook.com/strugglesistersunite)

<sup>3</sup> Mark Galli, "Let Kelly Gissendaner Live," *Christianity Today*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march-web-only/let-kelly-gissendaner-live.html>

is to save the grain. Jesus, the one who comes to judge us, is also the one who comes to save us.

Kelly's story illustrates another of John's points: that the fruits we bear, the ones that are worthy of our repentance, ripen in the places where we already are. Kelly hoped for clemency, but she bore fruit in prison. She did things that were within her power to build up the community right around her.

Likewise, Abiding Savior can do, and does do, things that are within our power to build up the community around us. Just over two weeks ago, I attended a documentary about homelessness in Durham. The documentary featured interviews with residents of the [Families Moving Forward](#) shelter. I knew we were looking for families to support through our Advent giving tree, so I reached out to the shelter to ask if any of the families would like Christmas presents. As it turned out, the children were already taken care of, but the request opened up a new opportunity: to give gifts to the parents, who do not typically receive anything through the gift-giving program. The Advent planning team enthusiastically selected two items from a list of wished-for home goods, and all 21 families in their program will receive a cozy throw blanket and a simple set of dishes that they can take with them into permanent housing. Picking a tag off the tree and giving one of these gifts seems like such a mundane act, but it is also a way of telling these parents that they are loved. It is a way of saying, "You belong in our community, and we want you to make a home among us." It is precisely in these seemingly insignificant actions that God's justice is enacted.

Every time you share from your abundance, or offer a word of encouragement, or console someone who is grieving, you are bearing fruits worthy of repentance. When you are an honest employee, a loyal spouse or partner, or a steadfast volunteer, you are bearing fruits worthy of repentance. When you visit the sick, homebound or imprisoned, you are bearing fruits worthy of repentance. When you give or receive forgiveness, you are bearing fruits worthy of repentance. When you serve a meal at Urban Ministries, when you provide school supplies to children in the neighborhood, when you advocate for affordable housing, you are bearing fruits worthy of repentance.

Every act of compassion and justice, small or large, is a reflection of our faith and our changed lives as forgiven and re-made people. Jesus already saved the whole world, so we don't have to. We only have to care for our small corner of it. And because the one who is coming will judge with righteousness, we do not have to judge anyone, only proclaim the mercy we have already experienced, bearing fruits worthy of repentance. Whether you are a Somebody or a Nobody, whether you are living the high life or lost in a wilderness, there are people around you who are hungry for the fruit you have to offer. Turn towards God and your neighbor and share it. Amen.