

Repenting Ain't For Sissies!

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented December 4th, 2016,
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 3: 1-12

I would love to have had John the Baptist's job. Well, who wouldn't! Think of how much fun it would be to have license to thunder judgment on the deserving. While most of us might wrinkle our brow and talk quietly and earnestly about how difficult it is to speak the judgment of God, we take secret delight in doing it. I'd trade in my Mazda in a second for some scratchy camelhair, even have a taste of a honey-dipped grasshopper, if I could stand in the pulpit and shout, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

I know something about this because I'm the second oldest of four boys; and since my older brother was useless, of course, my job was to be the mighty moral force for my younger siblings, to teach them right from wrong. One time I'd been left in charge of my little brother for an afternoon. He wanted pizza, so I graciously allowed him to put one of those French-bread pizzas in the toaster-oven. I also decided that he should learn something about sharing. I really wasn't very hungry, but I told him that he needed to give half the pizza to me. His sin was immediately apparent when he said, "No." We fought back and forth, but in the face of evil, I stood firm. And, of course, when he finally gave in to me and asked me what half I wanted, I said, "You can have the whole thing." How satisfying it is to be the righteous one, to bear the fruit of morality and to tell those sinners to repent. The truth of it is that we all like to play the role of John the Baptist. Judgment makes us feel like we're right. Being self-righteous makes us feel like we're worthy; and, of course, the way that most of us know that we're good is by pointing out those who are bad.

Announcing judgment is usually easy, and maybe it's true that during the Advent season we need a little fire and brimstone. In some ways, the nearer we get to Christmas morning the crazier we get. We shop and shop, sure that the pile of presents under the tree will be a measure of our love. We may be stingy all year, but, by God, we'll make up for it at Christmas time. 'Tis the season to be jolly, especially if you're part of the credit card industry.

This season more than any other points out the gap between our inner lives and our external behavior, smiling and cheery at the work party while inside we're drowning in loneliness and pain. The images of the happy family and the perfect Christmas become standards that announce judgment over our failed relationships and our inability to make things right.

John the Baptist points to the gap between our rhetoric and our behavior. He's the voice of judgement, showing us our sin and calling us to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Repentance is part of the Christian journey, and it's part of getting ready for Christmas. And it ain't for sissies. And if we're going to be really honest this Advent season, we probably need to be honest about our eagerness to judge rather than repent, our willingness to play the role of John the Baptist pointing out the sin of the world and our propensity to enjoy it. What's Christmas without a little complaining about all those Christians who only come to church on Christmas Eve? What's Christmas for the itchy, honey-tongued preacher if not thundering about the materialism and the commercialism of the season?

But John does a really interesting thing after his rant against the religious leaders who are coming for baptism. He stops wagging his finger at them, and he points away from their sinfulness and their need for genuine repentance, and he points to One who is coming after him. He points beyond his preaching to the horizon where the Son is beginning to rise. "I am not worthy to carry his sandals," he says. Preaching judgment is the easy part. John can only talk about those things that stand in the way of our faithful living. He blusters, yells, and spits out his judgment, but he remains in the wilderness, far away from the lives of those who are streaming to him.

Jesus, on the other hand, is the one who enters into the heart of human life, takes into himself all those things that separate us from God. He steps right up between our inner life and our external behavior. His work ends, not in self-righteous satisfaction at letting those sinners have it. On Easter morning, what we sinners get is his ongoing life. We may indeed be worthy of judgment, but what we get is new life.

To understand this text we need to rethink repentance and faith. Faith isn't so much about getting to heaven, and repentance isn't so much about avoiding hell. Repentance is about opening our hearts for him. But remember: repentance ain't for sissies! I'm often afraid that Christianity has perfected the art of judgment but hasn't finely pointed to the One who really does the judging, who is, of course, the same One who does the saving.

When I talk to people who aren't interested in the church, it's almost always because they believe that the church is more interested in judgment than it is in reconciliation. We've given the impression that our sinfulness is more powerful than Jesus, who is the heart of God beating in the world.

What all of us so deeply desire is to hear, that even though we know what we might deserve, love will come again. Judgment may consume us, but like dew in the face of a morning sun grace ignites us to be something alive.

Repentance ain't for sissies! I should tell you that even though I told the story about my younger brother at the beginning of the sermon in a way that sounds funny, the memory of that day is painful, because what damaged the relationship with my brother. I think he may have forgiven me, but I learned the price of forgetting that the relationship comes first, and that's what the coming one reminds us of - that God's relationship with us comes first, and it changes everything. Even when the winter nights get longer and darker and when our pain gets closer to the surface Advent, in the end, helps us to better understand what's happening on Jordan's banks.

*Stretch forth your hand, our health restore, - and help us rise to fall no more.
O let your face upon us shine, - and fill the world with love divine.*