
What Should We Do?

Luke 3:7-20

A sermon preached for the Frederick E. Turnage Distinguished Speaker Series,
Lakeside Baptist Church, Rocky Mount, NC, on Sunday, January 28, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

John must be having a pretty bad day because what kind of sermon introduction is that? “You brood of vipers!” That’s no way to begin a sermon. “Fourscore and seven years ago” or “Ladies and Gentlemen” maybe, but “you brood of vipers!”? He wouldn’t win any seminary preaching contests with that. And I can guarantee that he wouldn’t be voted in as the next Mayor of Rocky Mount. You wouldn’t ask him to join your pastoral staff at Lakeside. Can you imagine his pastoral care sessions? John wouldn’t be your first choice to run a church growth seminar. But, John is up to something else.

He’s not concerned with building a spiritual fan club. He’s a weirdo in the wilderness but he’s got a word from the Lord. It’s funny how God seems to use weirdos all the time—just look at us! John proclaims a word that slays and a word that saves. Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A tough word but a truthful one. Not a happy-clappy proclamation but one that will help for sure. So just when I thought John had it all wrong homiletically, I realized that he actually had it right. He was sick and tired of the same old slick and sleek self-serving spirituality that was only concerned with a beautiful Sunday liturgy with its magnificent Sunday music without any real engagement with the sick and widows and poor and orphans and bullied of the world. He was tired of Jesus talk without justice walk. His sermon introduction gets the crowds attention and it gets ours too, though I don’t recommend we greet each other by saying “you brood of vipers!” But he wants his listeners to know that this is serious and if they miss this, they miss the whole point of following God.

The crowds come out to be baptized. They come out to “wade in the water.” But John’s not satisfied with just singing a song and then going home to watch a Duke Men’s basketball game. He knows that Christian baptism, worship, is more than a song. He calls for something that will last, something that is concrete. And his message is not cheap grace. He says “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” suggesting that a repentant life will reveal itself in right living. Don’t say “We have Abraham as our ancestor” as if that will let you off the hook to live a fruitless life. “We’ve been a part of the Baptist Church since it was founded.” Don’t rely on religious memory. Don’t rely on the past and the good ole days. Don’t rely on past borne fruit that was once fresh and juicy but now is stale and rotten. Don’t rely on someone else to do for you, to bear fruit that only you can bear. Don’t rely on someone else’s salvation, someone else’s piety, someone else’s baptism, what they used to do in the church and how they used to run this or that ministry. If you just rely on a past piety (“we have Abraham as our ancestor”), you may be satisfied to just go and sit down at the coffee hour after church and think that your Christian duty is done for the week. “I’ve embodied the baptized life sipping my nonfat Starbucks caramel macchiato with whip,” all because of “father Abraham.” This faulty reliance on the past will not do for John. Doing this, in fact, is doing nothing. Solely celebrating history may lead to perpetual inactivity. This praise of an ancient piety may lead you only to pray while others act as a sign of their baptismal repentance. To pray without prayerful action may actually get you into trouble.

You might have heard about the missionary who was walking in a part of Africa when he heard the ominous noise of a lion behind him. “Oh Lord,” prayed the missionary, “Grant in Thy goodness that the lion walking behind me is a good Christian lion.” And then, in the silence that followed, the missionary heard the lion praying too: “Oh Lord, I thank Thee for the food which I am about to receive.” Sometimes you can’t just pray. You need to do something like run away or at least run while praying. I’m not knocking prayer. But I am saying that praying without prayerfully acting is the source of an anorexic faith. Doing nothing in the Christian life will make you spiritually thin and eventually lead to death. You may not be eaten by a lion but you will get burned.

And John confirms this. Bearing no good fruit, doing nothing that helps someone else, leads to a spiritual death. “The axe is lying at the root of the trees” and trees that bear bad fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire, burned up because no good fruit is borne from their life. Burned up because we maybe too comfortable sitting on a cushy pew. Devoured by a lion because of inactivity. Burned up because we are more interested in the glory days of the Church than the present days of renewal and reformation. And because of this fire of judgment that rains down on a do-nothing Christianity, the song “burn baby burn” takes on new meaning. But this does not mean that people are not doing anything. Maybe they are doing the wrong thing, bearing bad fruit.

The type of fruit that causes people to play god with guns by shooting up fellow human beings whenever they want. The type of fruit that says I’m pro-life except when it comes to the death penalty. The type of fruit that bullies folk just because they’re different. The type of fruit that equates being a Christian with being an American. The type of fruit that burns other religions’ sacred texts in the name of Jesus, causing Christianity to be equated with hatred and not the healing balm of Gilead. The type of fruit that hides behind a hypocritical Christianity that does and says one thing in the pulpit and another thing in everyday life.

This is what not to do and so the crowds, seeing what some Christians tend to do, ask John, “What should we do?” Crowds and “the world” usually get a bad rap in our day (“don’t follow the crowd”). But in this story, the crowd’s peer pressure would actually lead to authentic faithful living. The crowd gets it. They want to do Christian, not just be Christian. The crowd reveals that baptismal discipleship costs something, does something. It requires something from us. Repentance then forgiveness of sins. It is costly thus the crowd asks the right question. “What should we do?” It happens three times to get our attention like a repetitive righteous rap—what should we do, what should we do, what should we do. And the answers they receive are very practical, down-to-earth responses, theology in the flesh, in the world, on the backs, in the mouths, in the pockets of real people, not behind the corridors of denominational headquarters in a committee meeting where we talked about the last committee meeting where we talked about the last committee meeting.

What should we do? “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” What should we do? “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” What should we do? “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” Selfless sharing, anti-economic bullying, being content with what one has. Basically, “don’t be greedy” thinking “more” is ministry like the prosperity gospel gurus. Actually, selfless sharing may signify your own satisfaction with what God has already given you.

And what I love about this passage is that baptism is linked to mission in the world. Baptism has everything to do with social and economic justice. Baptism is not just a little sprinkling of water or full immersion in a pool, baptism is being plunged into a new way of living, being, and acting in the

world. Baptism immerses you into the ethics of Jesus and is connected to social responsibility and service towards others. Your conversion to Christianity, signified in your baptism, converts, literally turns you towards God and your turn to God is also a turn to the other. The invisible grace of the sacrament of baptism becomes visible in outward mission. Our baptism is not just for us but for others. We're baptized to be a blessing to someone else. Our baptism is interlocked with an ethic of generosity. Methodist liturgical historian, James White, says it best: "We undertake in baptism a serious responsibility not only for the spiritual welfare but also the material welfare of our fellow members of the body of Christ. The two cannot be separated. The deprivation of our neighbor is a sign of our failure to take our baptism seriously. On the other hand, deeds of love and charity are a form of living out our baptism."

Not an either/or but a both/and. Not just a baptismal rite but right action. Not just a sacrament but also service. Not just spiritually-ignited, but socially-engaged. Not just personal piety but social witness. Not just the liturgy but the liturgy after the liturgy. Not just the water of the Spirit but the work of the Spirit. Not just lip service but life service. Christian rhetoric and a Christian ethic. "What should we do?" is a call for Christian liturgical integrity. This is why one poet writes that he'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day. "What should we do?" says that we should do something. It reminds me of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his sermon "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." In it, he says that "life's most persistent and urgent question is what are you doing for others?" What are you doing for others? What should we do in light of our baptism?

Well, John just doesn't leave us with what we should do but leaves us with what God has done in Jesus Christ. "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Your generosity is important and "what should we do?" is a vital question but be careful not to focus only on human agency at the expense of Christology. John helps us to see our generosity in light of God's generosity. "What should we do?" should remind us of what God has already done in Christ and what God is doing and that "One who is more powerful than I is coming" and has come! John has a powerful ministry but watch out for Jesus! He's so powerful that he demonstrated strength in weakness as he became poor and hungry and naked. So much power that he was baptized unto death to serve us life. Jesus met and meets our needs when we don't expect it or deserve it. He looked beyond our faults and saw our need. God saw that we needed clothes and became clothed in our skin. God saw that we needed food and became daily bread for us. God saw that we were thirsty and poured life-giving blood in us. Christ's life is cruciform love and this love is like the energizer bunny—it keeps going and going and going and going. Going against all the odds. Going all the way to the cross.

Jesus risked it all for the world, even unto death because baptism kills you for the life of the world. Because Jesus has done so much for us, we can't help but do for others—that is a sign of being baptized in the Spirit. What we should do is discovered through what Jesus has done and is doing. Not everyone will like what is done. Not everyone will agree with what is done. John was thrown in prison. Jesus was thrown on a cross. "What should we do?" Remember your baptism. You died to live and because you died someone else should live. A life worth living is affirming the worth of every life. "If I can help somebody as I travel along. If I can help somebody with a word or song. If I can help somebody from doing wrong. My living shall not be in vain."