

Wheat or Chaff?

Today's gospel reading is especially important because it challenges us to examine not just our lives, but also our hearts and our intentions; that is, not just *what* we do, but *why* we do it. Like the whole of the Season of Advent, today's gospel reading has the theme of preparation — preparation for the coming of Christ — and self-examination, to see if we are truly ready for his Coming.

Historically, people have associated the advent (the second coming) of Christ with a time of judgement. Therefore it can have overtones of separation – the good are separated from the bad, the wheat is separated from the chaff. And the question today's gospel poses is “are we wheat to be stored in the granary, or are we chaff to be tossed into the fire?” That's what I meant earlier when I said that there are themes of self-examination woven throughout this season. And we are helped along in that process of self-examination by John the Baptist who, addresses three areas of our lives: (1) Our relationship with God; (2) Our relationship with the people around us, in terms of business transactions; and (3) Our relationship with the people around us, in terms of the way we respect and treat them.

With regard to our relationship with God, John the Baptist addressed himself to a group of pious Jews, probably Pharisees. Now, the Pharisees tend to get a bad rap from us. We see them as the ones who opposed Jesus; therefore, in some ways we see them as the enemy. However, and by most standards, the Pharisees were good people. They were diligent in their faith, they worked very hard to follow all of the demands of the Law, and they were charitable and took advantage of opportunities to help those in need. So why should John be blasting them, calling them a “brood of vipers?” I suspect that John is not critical of their lifestyles, but rather of their assumptions.

John condemned the Pharisees because they were simply trusting in their connection to Abraham — that is, in their heritage as Israelites — to ensure them God's favor. This kind of thinking places more importance on one's position in society, and on one's choice of religions in securing God's favor, rather than on the faithful response of someone to the work of God in their life. And this kind of thinking, John is saying, is wrong. And so we must ask ourselves, on what do we base our hope for God's favor. Do we believe that the denomination which we belong to in some way makes a difference? I know that some denominations do have this attitude. But does being an Episcopalian, for example, really make any difference in the eyes of God? No, and to those who might claim otherwise, John would probably say to us that God could raise up Episcopalians from the stones on the ground.

You see, it doesn't matter who we are, or where we come from. If we are confident that God will look upon us favorably, it should be because we are trusting in God's faithfulness, and

in His promises to us. Any other source of confidence in our salvation is misdirected. Therefore we must consider, if we are confident before God, we must ask our selves ‘why.’

The second area of our lives that John the Baptist challenges us to examine is how we interact with others, especially in terms of our business transactions. John tells the tax collectors to collect only what is designated from each person. You see, some tax collectors were in the habit of demanding more than was appointed, and keeping the extra for themselves. And in this way they could grow rich and fat at the expense of others.

So we are challenged to examine how we interact with others. Do we ever take unfair advantage of others in order to benefit ourselves? Do we ever pass along misinformation or half-truths about our co-workers so that we get the promotion. Do we use our influence to hurt others? Do we try to make others look bad so that we can look better? If we do these things, we demonstrate not only our lack of love for our neighbors, but also our lack of faith in God to supply all we need. For God wants to provide for our needs. God wants us to be in positions of dependence upon Him. How we live our lives, and what we do with the talents that God has given us, reflects whether or not we trust God or ourselves.

The third area of our lives, that John challenges us to examine, has to do with whether we respect the dignity and humanity of others. John said to the soldiers gathered there, “rob no one by violence, or false accusation, and be content with your wages.” This is not simply an injunction against violence against others; rather it is a plea to treat others with the respect and dignity that should be afforded all people. We should respect others, not because of who they are, but because of what they are: Like you and me, they are God’s children, and loved by God. Jesus showed us that God treats all people alike, and so should we. This is not to say that we shouldn’t respect authority; but what it is saying is that we should not disrespect someone because of their lack of authority, or their lack of etiquette, or whatever.

What John was calling for was not simply a change of living or work habits. Rather it was a call to a transformation of our whole lifestyle, our attitude and concerns, and our faith. John was calling the people to look beyond themselves, and their own needs and wants, and to consider the people around them. This change was not to be based on the hope that by doing good we would somehow earn God’s favor. Rather, because we know that we already have God’s favor, we can respond to the needs of others because we trust God’s faithfulness to us, and God’s ability to meet our needs.

This is not to say that our actions are of no consequence; in fact, just the opposite. What we do, and what we make of our lives, is very important, because this is how we can bear witness to the faithfulness of God, and to the fact that we are trusting God. This is an important part of repentance; deciding to trust God alone. And our faithful response to God is what John calls the fruit of repentance: That when we have two coats, we give one to someone who has none; That when we have enough to eat, we give to someone who doesn’t.

We await the coming of Christ and the judgement that will follow. Whether we are found to be among the wheat or chaff will depend largely on whether we lived our lives in faithful response to God and of His generosity. But in either case, know that God loves us and will never let us go.

And in the meantime, and in this Season of Advent, we should do whatever we can to get ready for the arrival of Christ. And if you need some guidance in that endeavor, remember these things:

We are called to be generous with others
because God is generous with us.

We are called to respect the dignity of others
because God respects our dignity.

We are called to be confident of our relationship with God,
not because of who we are or what we have done,
but because of who God is and what He has already done for us.

Amen.