



Christ United Methodist Church

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Date: December 16, 2018

Sermon: The Source of Real Joy

Text: Luke 3:7-18

Speaker: Pastor Don Archer

The person and the words of John the Baptist pay us their annual visit in today's gospel reading. John's life and his message were part of the process of preparing the way of the Lord. Preparing the way for the long awaited Messiah. Preparing the way for Jesus. John's preparation is bold, blunt, offensive, and disturbing. He calls those who come to hear him, *a brood of vipers*. He insists that claiming Abraham as an ancestor doesn't matter. What matters, John tells the stunned crowds, is something he calls: *Bearing fruits worthy of repentance*.

Let me stop at this point and say that by our modern standards, JTB is in trouble. All of the literature that I have read, all the workshops, seminars, and other training events that I have attended make it clear that calling the people who show up at worship *a brood of vipers* is not welcoming. It is not radical hospitality. Statistics indicate that 90% of first time church visitors who are greeted as *vipers* do not return for a second visit. Further, research indicates that insulting or diminishing the religious or spiritual heritage of the congregation is not conducive to church growth. Finally, suggesting or demanding that spiritual seekers significantly change their way of life is guaranteed to send people running toward the exits.

JTB was unapologetically guilty of all of these things. And yet, we are told that *crowds* came out to hear him and hearing him responded by being baptized by him! This goes against everything we have been taught about growing or increasing attendance and/or participation in the church.

So, what was going on? Why did so many people come to hear the *exhortations of John*? I think part of the answer can be found in the question that those who were baptized asked him. *What then should we do?*

I don't know what baptism, as practiced by John, looked like. I know that in our own service of baptism, candidates are asked a series of questions **before** they are baptized. In today's text we are told that those who were baptized asked questions afterward. And the question they asked? *What then should we do?*

John provided answers to that question. Both general and specific answers. To begin with, John called on everyone to *bear fruits worthy of repentance*. By this, John implies that it is not enough to talk about, rely upon, or trust in, what we have done, how great our church is, how many years we, or our family, has been attending this church. The important thing is our current expression/reaction to the grace of God. Grace that leads to, or results in, visible repentance.

When our conversation is mostly about the way things used to be, we are in trouble. JTB told the crowds that claiming Abraham as an ancestor was not enough. That is in the past. The present is our concern.

What then should we do? In reply he said them, *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.* I am confident that John can be taken literally here. He was actually telling those who had two coats to give one to someone who didn't have a coat. He was also serious about sharing food with those who were hungry. He was not speaking metaphorically. When tax collectors asked him what they should do, John told them to stop their practice of collecting sums that were in excess of their commission. Stop shaking people down for money they didn't have. Soldiers asked John what they should do. *He said to them, do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be content with your wages.* John is calling for an end to the abuse of power.

These were practical things that people were being asked to do. These were the *fruits worthy of repentance* that John was calling people to cultivate. The things that John told the crowd to do were not easy. In each case, he was asking for an act, not only of repentance, but of letting go. Giving up a level of security, status, or power. He could never get away with something like that today. Could he?

A young seminary student, in his third year of preparing for ordination, came to one of his advisors and announced: *I'm leaving seminary and going back to California to start a church.* His advisor was both shocked and concerned. This was a bright, promising clergy prospect. He only had one more year, just a few classes to receive his M.Div. and certain ordination. *Just be patient.* He was told. *No, I have to go, I feel that this is what God wants me to do.* Despite the best advice from faculty and friends, off he went to an LA suburb. He started a church and began to draw a curious and devoted congregation. Just as this church was starting to really get off the ground, the young pastor did his best to destroy it. One Sunday he addressed the congregation by saying that *we are all a bunch of pretenders.* Sound familiar? He went on to outline the plight of the young people in the community where the church was located. *How can we call ourselves disciples of Jesus if we see the violence and lack of guidance that plague the young people who are our sons and daughters and do nothing.* He then shared his hope and vision of a community youth center that would provide tutoring, health care, recreation, and many other resources.

It is time, he said, for us to decide whether our faith will have any impact on the community we live in.

He then asked the ushers to come forward. (The offering had already been taken, but he asked the ushers to come back for round 2) Stunned worshipers were challenged to not only give cash, but to part with their jewelry. Watches, rings, etc.. In addition, he dared to suggest that those who had more than one car, could sign over the title to the second and give it to the church. He challenged business leaders to commit to tithing a portion of their profits to this vision. He asked for real estate folk to find property where the youth center could be built. Eyebrows were raised, deep breaths were taken and so was the offering. The plates came back with cash, checks, rings, watches, pieces of paper with pledges of property and possessions. When the plates were placed on the table and

prayer of thanksgiving was offered, the congregation burst into applause and people began to embrace one another. It was a **moment of joy**. There was no scam or scandal. The gifts given were used as intended and the youth center was built and lives were changed. *Bearing fruit worthy of repentance.*

If we want to experience joy in our life, we may want to dare ask God, *What should I do?* If we want to experience joy in our church we may want to ask the question that the crowds asked of JTB: *What then should Christ Church do?* It may very well be that this concept of joy is connected to the call to *bear fruits worthy of repentance. Prepare the way of the Lord.*

There is gospel truth in the old adage that if you want joy in your life, do all that you can to create it in the lives of others. When we do that we are doing the work of the kingdom of God and we will know what it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Amen.