

Imagine with me that we have been given free tickets to the MCI Center to hear a truly fantastic motivational speaker. This person is so fantastic that we are willing to drive the two hours into the District, have a meal in Chinatown, and pay whatever fee we have to in order to park the car. Such a person might be Zig Ziglar or Tony Robbins. For me, it would be Oprah.

We have found a premium and safe parking spot for less money than we expected, the meal in Chinatown was out of this world, we have found our seats in the nose bleed section of the MCI Center - We have free tickets, after all - and we have settled in. We observe that there doesn't appear to be an empty seat in the house. The anticipation in the air is palpable. Finally, finally the great speaker comes out to wild applause. Multiple bows are taken before a hush falls over the crowd and the speaker begins.

To our surprise, the speaker snarls at us. "Each and every person here is malicious! In every context, you are poisonous to those around you. Who told you to come here and receive inspiration? Just because you were born in America or lucky enough to be here this evening, don't think that entitles you to a blessed thing!"

We glance at one another, shifting in our seat. We wonder if this is some kind of joke – is this some type of seminar where we are emotionally torn down before we are built back up? Perhaps we are wondering if we should just slip quietly out the back. Yet, the person on the stage is riveting. Someone down front yells “What should we do?” And then the speaker tells us.

Maybe this is a 21st Century version of what it must have been like for those who came to hear John the Baptist. He must have been quite a charismatic person to have drawn such crowds and having gained dedicated disciples. He must have had a compelling message that people could hear and accept what was wrong in their lives and in their relationship with God.

So who *was* this John the Baptist? As we know from our reading last week, he was the son of a Jewish high priest and a relative of Mary, on his mother’s side. Like the prophet and judge Samuel, his life was dedicated to the Lord by his parents. He lived in “the wilderness.” He was an ascetic. His preaching was so effective that lives were changed and people oriented themselves toward God. He baptized people as a sign of their deliberate self- dedication to God. He may have been part of the Essene community. Certainly, he lived in an “Essene” neighborhood.

Essenes were a Jewish sect, smaller in number than the Pharisees and Sadducees. They felt that they were entrusted with a mission by God, and strived daily to adhere to the 613 laws contained in the Torah. They did not marry, they possessed no money and embraced voluntary poverty. They lived communally. We know all this from the excavations that occurred after the Dead Sea Scrolls found in 1949 in a community called Qumran. Unlike the Essenes, however, who were daily baptized in a purity ritual, John baptized people only once as a sign of their repentance and dedication to God.

And, John the Baptist provides a very pragmatic response to the heartfelt question of “What should we do?” John has let the crowd know that they can’t rely on simply being children of Abraham – that isn’t good enough. John is telling them, and consequently us, that how we behave is more important than simply believing in God. A true child of Abraham, whether part of the tribe or not, is one who exhibits faithfulness in his or her life. His call to repentance is a call to be humbly obedient to God, characterized by a life lived honestly and with concern for those in need. Repentance is an acknowledgement that we are not self-sufficient, that we rely first and foremost on God, and that we have need of others.

Notice that John's answers to the crowd, to the tax collectors, to the soldiers can all be said to invoke mercy and justice. Share – give out of your excess – and keep no more than you need to. Our Food Pantry, our usage of our building and our annual coat drive are excellent examples of how we as a parish community share.

Treat others fairly, don't abuse your position. These wise words are well known to me as a civil servant and all civil servants that I know take them seriously. John's directions about what to do made Robert Fulgham a best-selling author a few decades ago with his book "Everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten."

Treating others fairly is also a call to justice, a call to address systemic and institutional injustices – all those "-isms" such as racism, and classism and so on. We are called to find and name root causes so that we can acknowledge them and do something about them. This is as much a challenge in our own day as it was in the first Century. That a celebrity turned politician calls for the exclusion of any Muslim from anywhere from entering our country simply by virtue of religious affiliation is a repugnant action to me. It is too broad a brush to paint and does

not represent our ideals as Americans, much less reflective our own behavior as a Christian.

John's pragmatic direction for "what should I do" is contained in our own baptismal vows in our turning our backs on evil and turning toward Christ, giving Jesus our whole trust in his grace and love. Our baptismal covenant tells us how – seeking and serving Christ in all persons and striving for justice and peace. Living this out demonstrates in the world that we are Christians.

Before we metaphorically approach the manger where the infant Jesus lays, John is calling us to examine our behavior and recommit ourselves to the Christian life. Our thoughtful and intentional recommitment leads us to sing aloud with Zephaniah and rejoice with Paul. Our gentleness will indeed be known to everyone and God's peace will settle upon us, guarding our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.

AMEN