



SUNDAY SERMON  
**TOUGH LOVE**

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What then, should we do? This was the question the crowds asked of John the Baptist when he confronted them with his stark preaching - really stark preaching! How would you like it if I came in one Sunday and began "You brood of vipers! Bear fruits worthy of repentance - or else the axe will be laid to the root of your tree - to cut it down and throw it into the fire"? And furthermore, what if I said, that this loving, kind Jesus whose coming we celebrate in ten days, is coming as a winnow - fork in hand - a man of fire who will destroy what is chaff! I doubt you'd return often for more - none of us likes to be judged and threatened like this!

Except that we say we value honesty - we hold it as one of the highest virtues, particularly in this time when it can be so trampled upon, so debased. So listen to John and to Jesus as they give what may have been brutally honest criticism in their time. Painful as it is to hear, honest criticism, honest judgement is essential if people are to change. Whether far from us - warring people in Yemen and Syria, bomb builders in Korea, violence and desperation in Central America, or close to home - our tortured, conflicted electoral politics, or in our homes, where our marriages or our own children or we ourselves might be in trouble - wherever change is needed, there must be honesty first - the recognition that something is wrong before new life can happen. Only when brokenness is named, can it begin to be healed. Carolyn Hax, my favorite Washington Post advice columnist, counseled someone this week to take a hard look at some difficult realities in her life, to "see the whole truth of it - then find the courage to live it."

We need truth-tellers in our day, and I do believe people will listen - just as people came voluntarily to listen to John, and then to Jesus. We are fed up with lies - we've grown cynical because there are so many of them. Judgment is not easy to hear, but it can be a whole lot better for us than comforting lies.

There was a time when comforting lies in the form of positive affirmation were deemed to be more effective than judgment and criticism in raising children. We were to constantly bolster our children's egos, make sure everyone was a winner. But children have excellent radar for hypocrisy, and I don't think our children respect us when we fail to confront them about irresponsible or immoral behavior - when we treat their lapses as just part of a phase, something we hope they'll outgrow. Just recently, my oldest son, now with daughters of his own, told me he didn't think I'd been strict enough - I'd let too much go by - not confronted him at times when I probably should have but didn't because I wanted to avoid conflict, or maybe I was just too busy.

Methodist bishop and professor William Willimon tells the story of a student at Duke coming back to visit and reminding him about something he said to her years before when she was trying to decide about taking a big job in L.A.

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DATE  
Advent 3  
Sunday, Dec. 16 , 2018

PREACHER  
The Rev. Susan Flanders

Phil. 4:4-9  
Luke 3:7-18

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Apparently Willimon told her "he was tired of people like her who hadn't anything better to do than worry about which dumb, high-paying executive job to take after graduation." It had made her mad at the time, but she also realized he was right, and that what he'd said let her know he cared enough about her to tell her the truth and talk straight to her. It had changed her life, set her on a path to truly fulfilling work she might otherwise never have found. Brutal honesty can be hard to hear, but also life-changing.

Speaking of positive affirmation, we almost never get judgment from commercial ads - instead we are told to pamper ourselves "You deserve a treat today; grab for all the gusto you can get; you're so worth it." But positive affirmation is a lie if never tempered by critical reflection on the truth of our situation, as a nation and as individuals. Denial of climate change caused by humans is a good example of lying to keep people comfortable or to ward off change that could cause economic difficulty. Positive affirmation can actually harm us when it masks our sinfulness and never reminds us of ways we fall short.

Think about times when you've been evaluated - in school, in a job, in a friendship. The compliments, the positive feedback or high grades make us feel good, but it is the criticism, we remember - especially when it pierces to the core because we know it is honest. I think, deep down, most of us know our faults, and deep down, we know we could change ourselves and our world - but sometimes we need to be told! We need John the Baptist to level with us.

What we meet in the gospel passage and in our own lives is the need for honest judgement that fits in with our need to love and be loved. There is tension here, but judgement and love are not opposites - the former can be part of the latter. Love without judgement has no enduring strength, no rigor, and judgement without love can be terribly cruel.

Is John the Baptist's judgment loving? Perhaps the modern term "tough love" applies here. John is not preaching love that wallows in complacency and feel-good comfort, he is preaching tough love - the love that brings about change because it confronts us and our world and tells us what we need to hear - that change is needed.

And so then, the question in response to judgment today, as it was in John's day is this: What then, should we do - in this season, in these weeks of Advent, in this troubled world? We see so much that is broken and wrong; we follow the news, and for me, it is like suspended animation - what is going to happen? And when? And - what then, what now, should we do, you and I personally, and all of us as citizens? These questions are where we must start - they are our basis for hope if Christmas is to mean anything at all this year. If the vision of God's love, alive and active in our humanity, as the birth of Jesus exemplifies, if this vision is to ever become real, it demands our participation. We must move beyond hand-wringing about the problems out there, beyond "ain't it awful" to how we can help to change things, to what we should actually do.

And here is where the second part of the gospel reading offers concrete suggestions, sound advice for how we move from the dismal way that things are to the way they ought to be - that gap that Ledlie described several sermons ago. The gap between what is and what ought to be. We need to face reality, no matter how grim, but we also long to move beyond it to our better selves, a better country, a better world.

So here is John's advice, very concrete, and it contains much that is pertinent now despite its ancient origin:

John insists on three things:

First - sharing of the necessities of life. Those who have, need to share with those who don't. If we have more than enough, we should give some to those who don't have any.

Second, John insists that people don't cheat. He's talking to tax collectors, but this could mean anyone whose greed gets in the way of honest dealing.

Finally, to soldiers - who are also asking "What then, shall we do?" John replies that they must not use their power to game the system, to extort or make up false charges.

John was addressing current problems of his own day, ways people were mistreating one another, not loving their neighbors. He is saying that in behaving justly where they live and work, they will be ridding themselves and their community of the kind of chaff that weakens and sickens us, even today. John's suggestions may not change the world, but they will make a difference. When John talks about Jesus' winnowing fork, I think maybe it's about God's mercy and forgiveness that meet us in our sins, not destroying us, but offering a way through the chaff to new life and change.

There may be broods of vipers in our very midst, there may be chaff choking out the wheat and making us sick. John could be talking to people and groups in our world today, and maybe even to us. But perhaps we can receive judgement given in love when we know it's not the last word, that there is a remedy. The remedy of the gospel is forgiveness - we can turn, repent, live a different way. We can respond to God's love, even when it is sometimes offered to us in honest criticism meant to help us change.

The short reading from Philippians speaks of the peace that passes all understanding - a great paradox - this peace of God. Can we really find peace in daily actions when there is so much turmoil in the world, and often in our own lives? When honest judgment stings, can we see beyond it to a love that would have us change? This vision, of how things might be is not beyond our striving. This vision of peace flickers in our hearts and all across the world in the hearts of friends and enemies as well. It is a deep human longing, and we should never let it flicker out in the face of present realities. We are called to act - in personal and public ways. We are called to change, called to new life.

In following this call, may the Holy Spirit guide us, not only to question what we can do, but to do what we can. May judgment and love work together, not to condemn us but to encourage us to bear fruit, to be God's love in our wounded world. We pray this in the name of the one who comes always, God's love in our humanity, Jesus, our Christ. Amen.