

“The Kingdom of Heaven”

Last week I introduced you to Rev. Matthew Johnson, associate pastor of Barrington UMC in Illinois. Writing this week in *Christian Century*, he gives us a story which illustrates the impact of John the Baptist upon his society. During the late 1980s, a construction crew showed up to replace the back stoop of his grandparents’ house with a grand concrete patio. It was quite an undertaking. They dug up trees and shrubs, scraped away mounds of dirt, and raked in a dump truck full of gravel. All that work caused quite a disturbance for the local creatures that lived in the long untouched soil surrounding the house. Bees whose hives likely collapsed in the early digging crawled out with furious buzzing. A horde of mice found their way into the house and set off traps. And when the concrete was being poured, all manner of crawling squirming things got stuck in it as it cured.

All this commotion bewildered the grandchildren. They complained about the influx of beasts with their stinging and scurrying. And Grandma would say, “When you cause a ruckus, you’re gonna stir things up.” That was all well and good until the day the snakes showed up. I know from personal experience that perfectly normal people can go crazy when the snakes show up. When I was in high school a snake got in our garage, and my mother started screaming. She yelled for me to kill the snake. I took a hoe and chopped it into about ten pieces.

About a year ago, our cats discovered a baby snake coiled up in the corner of our den. Ellisa got upset and told me to kill it. I got it outside and chopped it into about ten pieces. Neither of the snakes was poisonous but they still scared the devil out of everyone!

Rev. Johnson's grandmother was taking the laundry out when a pair of young gray rat snakes shimmied their way across the new patio slabs. She screamed and dropped the laundry basket with a thud. She found a hoe and used it to sever each of the snakes near their middles. When her husband appeared, she said, "This is the why we leave things as they are."

This story illustrates how people want change but sometimes only want it to go so far. When John the Baptist first appears in Matthew's gospel, baptizing at the river's edge, he seems okay with what he has stirred up. Word has spread up and down the river, and a great many are coming to him from all over the place. They're listening, and he's getting what he believes God wants. He is proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven and that the people are to repent.

But when the Pharisees and Sadducees arrive, all that changes. John receives what he is expecting and still manages to get upset by the results. These two groups of Jewish leaders, who normally were opposition parties, have united against John and are already showing their political unity which they will later use

against Jesus. John questions both their motives and their faith. He describes them as only “coming to where he was baptizing.” In Matthew’s view they represent the Jewish opposition who came to inspect John rather than be baptized by him. They were not genuine in their repentance.

John refers to them as a “brood of vipers.” This causes one to picture the crowds as scurrying away from the coming eschatological judgment like snakes fleeing a forest fire. The phrase “son of snakes” literally may suggest the dualistic opposition between the Kingdom of God---appearing in Jesus and proclaimed by John--- and the “sons of the evil one” represented by the Jewish leaders and those persuaded by them. Vipers is not just an insult but pictures the predatory, poisonous false teachers who pervert the people.

John sees the judgement already on the horizon. This is the basis for his urgent call for repentance. John was from God. He pointed beyond himself to make people focus on God. He frequently denounced evil wherever he saw it, in the church, in the state, in the Temple, in the crowd. He was a light in dark places.

The abruptness of John is how God works. God’s thrusts into history are often strange, unforeseen and unpredictable. Sometimes an Elijah appears, a Berlin Wall is dismantled, a Martin Luther King, Jr. strides across the landscape. Let us

always be open to this jarring, abrupt working by God in our lives, in our culture, in our community.

And let us not be complacent in our faith. John tells the people that being Jewish alone will not save them. An appeal to belonging to the elect group by virtue of descent from Abraham would not save one from the fiery judgment. Inclusion in the holy people of God and acceptance at the last judgement is based not on descent from Abraham, but a response to the call to decision, to baptism, and to the corresponding “fruits” (a fundamental representation of a life of discipleship to Jesus).

The commentator William Barclay writes of how we as Christians need to understand the Jewish view of repentance, for much of the Christian faith is grounded in Jewish theology. To the Jew, repentance was central to all religious faith and to all relationship with God. Divine forgiveness and restoration of God’s favor are never refused to genuine repentance. Repentance is the great mediational bond between God and man. The Jewish word for repentance is *teshubah*, which is the noun for the verb *shub* which means to turn. This is a turning from evil and a turning towards God.

When a person repents, one must fully resolve in one’s mind that he will not do it again. There must be a change in action. The Rabbis said, “Be not be like

fools who, when they sin, bring a sacrifice, but do not repent.” In Ecclesiastes 31, we read, “So a man who fasts for his sins and goes again and does the same thing-- -who will listen to his prayer, and what profit is there in afflicting himself?”

In the Jewish belief repentance is always available. No case is hopeless for repentance. This is important to remember when one encounters or witnesses to a person who believes they are beyond redemption. Even some of the Jewish leadership, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Saul would eventually turn to Jesus.

The Rabbis stressed again and again the importance of human relationships and setting them right. Injury must be repaired and pardon sought and forgiven. In true repentance, reparation is necessary. Confession is equally necessary. True repentance necessitates the humility to admit and to confess our sin. Repentance is the turning towards the life that God means for us to live.

John the Baptist baptized with water for repentance. He stressed that the judgment was on the horizon. This was necessary for his ministry. He said that the one who would come (Jesus) would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. John knew that Jesus would be the one who would accomplish the judgment itself, which would purify the righteous and burn up the unrighteous, as we read the symbolism of burning the chaff with fire.

But ultimately John has to learn Jesus' complete ministry. We should take this as a lesson that we should constantly learn about God's work in the world. In Matthew 11(2-3) we understand that Jesus did not in fact conform to John's expectations of what the mightier one would be. John expected a violent eschatological judge. Yet in Matthew 11 Jesus was a forgiving, accepting, non-retaliatory suffering servant king and his strength was his meekness. John is confused when he hears about Jesus's compassion and his miracles instead of a fiery judgment. He asks if we should wait for another Messiah.

John's question focuses on that tension that has always existed in Christianity. Should we focus on bringing people to repentance, or should we focus on bringing compassion to those in need? In closing let us remember that a thorough study of scripture shows there is not a tension. True repentance brings one into right relationship with God and with fellow human beings. And, as William Barclay comments, the Jewish faith has always held that true repentance bring forth fruits which demonstrate the reality of repentance. This is also true of the Christian faith. As God is there for us, one who has truly repented will always be there for those the one in need, the one in need of compassion and help. Such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church
December 8, 2019