

Do the Right Thing

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Advent, December 15, 1991 at Oxford High School. Scripture Lessons: Luke 3:7-18

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

You brood of vipers, John said. Who warned you to flee the wrath to come. The ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not gear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. This was John the Baptist's message.

But what does this have to do with Christmas? Why has the church for the last thousand years or more chosen to concentrate it's attention on John the Baptist for two of the four weeks in Advent? Personally, I prefer "Twas the Night Before Christmas." Christmas is supposed to be about God's love, not God's coming wrath. And why does John call these people who come out to hear him "vipers". Why couldn't ^{we} call them "children of God" or even Teddy Bears? Vipers are poisonous snakes who lie under rocks and suddenly and lethally strike and kill their prey. Not a very complementary thing to say to a congregation who travels into the wilderness to hear you preach. *Maybe we read this at Xmas to put us straight as to how to prepare as Xus for Xmas.*

The amazing thing is the kind of response that John got. "What shall we do?" the people cried out. *In the book of Acts* Luke tells us that early Christian preaching, unlike the lectures that pass for preaching today, often moved the congregation to cry out, "What must I do?" Nowadays, sermons are more likely to move people to say, "How much longer is he going to talk?"

John the Baptist broke every rule that I learned in seminary with regard to preaching. The first rule is that you try to win your listeners by saying things that may make them laugh or feel good. You certainly don't call them a brood of vipers. And secondly, you talk about God's love, not God's wrath which is so easily misunderstood. And thirdly, you don't tell people what to do. You try to get them to think for themselves and find their own solutions to their problems.

Maybe John the Baptist had the right approach and we, in the main-line churches, have the wrong approach. ^{That's what a number of preachers & professors are now saying} One of the most serious failings of the modern main-line churches, writes Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University, is that we preachers have failed to tell our congregations what to do. Now remember Stanley Hauerwas is not a fundamentalist but a respectable professor and minister in a mainline church. But he challenges some of the main things I learned in seminary. One of the things I learned was that ministers should not tell people what to do. We should help people discover what is best for themselves.

For example, if someone in the congregation comes to me and says that he's been committing adultery I'm supposed to ask, "How do you feel about this? What would you like to do?" And the minister is suppose to offer "unconditional positive regard" (that was the phrase that was used) to the man assuring the man that the minister will be supportive in whatever decision he makes. Hauerwas, who like me was also indoctrinated in this

method of pastoral counseling, is now raising serious objections. He's become more like John the Baptist. He counsels ministers to say to the one involved in adultery, "You keep this up and you're going to destroy your wife, your children, the person you're having an affair with and you're going to end up in hell yourself. Adultery is sin. It's wrong. You must repent. I'll support you in this and I'll be there when you fail but you must do the right thing."

John the Baptist pulled no punches. He told people what they must do. They must share what they have with those who don't have. They must not take what doesn't belong to them. They must be satisfied with what they have. They must not use their power and prestige to oppress others. And with many other exhortations he preached the good news.

Someone recently gave me an editorial by William Raspberry which they'd discussed at the Apple Festival. I don't know if Raspberry is conservative or liberal but I enjoy reading his editorials from time to time and I agreed with this one in particular. He asks the question, "How do you explain the declining ethical standards of Americans". He lists some possible reasons: the pressure of TV advertising, the greed-is-O.K. legacy of the Reagan years, the growing contrast between the haves and have-nots, the capitulation of politicians to 'special interests', society's emphasis on individual concerns and the disintegration of the family.

All these things play a part in the decline of ethics but, according to

Raspberry, there's a simpler reason why so many youngsters have not learned the values espoused by their elders. They haven't been taught.

"They haven't been taught by the institutions (home, school and church) traditionally responsible for ethical instruction, and they haven't been taught by the example of their elders."

Raspberry quotes Jesse Jackson. Jackson was talking about the importance of learning ethnic history and experiencing ethnic pride. He said, "We agree that ethnic pride is a good thing.... We want to teach it in school because we assume the children have not learned it elsewhere. Isn't it interesting that we can see the necessity of teaching ethnic pride and not see the necessity of teaching ethical pride? The Ten Commandments aren't being taught any more than black history. Don't you think that might have something to do with the way our young people are behaving?"

Raspberry concludes, "... for the first time in our history our children are cut off from the values-forming myths that constitute our own moral compass: Bible parables, tales of Honest Abe, accounts of self-sacrificing abolitionists, stories of men and women whose heroism consisted not in striking it rich but in doing the right thing." John the Baptist, I think, would agree with Raspberry.

In another editorial I read,
"Most of us would remember the story of Abe Lincoln's walking seven miles to return two cents he had overcharged a woman when he was a clerk in a store. How many of us today would walk a block to do the same thing?"

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" Is it all right to pad an insurance claim so long as don't get caught? Is it all right to cheat in an examination to get a passing grade -- if we don't get caught? If a conductor forgets to collect a bus or railroad fare, is it all right to say nothing and accept a free ride? Is it all right to "borrow" or take supplies and equipment for personal use from our place of employment? Is it less serious to steal from a company than it is from another person?"

' What harm does it do the railroad if the conductor doesn't collect? They have to run the train anyway, don't they? What difference does it make to a big insurance company if I pad my claim? It's only a drop in the bucket to them, isn't it? Who's going to get hurt if I cheat on an examination to get a passing grade? It isn't going to hurt the teacher or school, is it? But, how would I like to have a doctor operate on you or a loved one who cheated his or her way through medical school" (Nightingale).

Michael Josephson of the Josephson Institute of Ethics labels a large segment of the population as "I-Deserve-Its" or "IDI's". "The IDI world view results in a greater willingness to abandon traditional ethical restraints in the pursuit of success, comfort or personal goals. They, the I-Deserve-Its, are more likely than others to lie, cheat and engage in irresponsible behavior when it suits their purpose."

The 1980s was a decade of unprecedented economic growth. It was also, as *Time* magazine labeled it, "a decade of greed." It was the age of

yuppies (young urban professionals) and dinks (double income, no kids) and their status symbols. It was also the age of the Savings and Loan scandal which will cost taxpayers \$200 billion to fix. The 80s saw the record-setting earnings of Michael Milken, junk bond king, who grossed \$550 million in 1987, and was subsequently indicted on 98 counts of fraud. Similarly, security speculator Ivan Boesky was sentenced to a three-year term in federal prison.

John the Baptist warned his congregation of the coming wrath of God. He told them what they must do to escape. And he pointed to Christ, who, unlike him could do more than simply tell us what is the right thing to do. Christ, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, enables us to do the right thing and when we fail to forgive us and restore to fellowship with God our heavenly Father.

Let us pray: Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily heal and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.