

Rejoice in the Lord always

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2009.

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

Luke 3:10

This Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as *Gaudete* Sunday, taken from the Latin "to rejoice." In the letter to the Philippians, St. Paul writes, *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.* It is with great joy that we proclaim our redemption. Today is also known as "Stirrup Sunday" after the collect for the day in which we pray that God will stir up in us the power of grace and mercy. In this season when we tend to grow anxious wanting everything to be just right, Paul urges us not to give in to anxiety and concentrate on what is at the heart of this beautiful and blessed season.

The eccentric and unconventional lifestyle of John the Baptist is enough to put people off, but his message is one of clarity and urgency. In calling people to repent and change the direction of their lives, he knows that he isn't going to gain any popularity. He is not interested in that. He is only interested in carrying out the mission God has given him. You can imagine that calling people a brood of vipers is not what they want to hear, but it does gain their attention. As a prophet, he is telling the people that they must not accept the status quo. When they ask, "What then should we do?" he tells them, "If you have clothing, share with those who have none. If you have food, share with those who are hungry. Tax collectors are to be honest in what they receive and soldiers must not be oppressive." Lest there be any confusion as to who he is, John makes it very clear that he is not the Messiah. The one who is to come, whose sandals he is not worthy to untie, is much greater than he. John baptizes with the water of repentance while the One who is to come will baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

What was true then is just as true now: there is no better time than the present to get our lives in order. We can't escape judgment and we can't avoid being tested every day. What we must do is to live each day in a state of readiness. Now is the time to get our lives in order. Now is the time to make amends and to be more aware of those whom we might easily ignore. To close the widening gap between the rich and the poor, those who have must provide for those who have not.

To maintain a sense of integrity we must be honest and forthright. It is better to speak up in the face of what we know is wrong, lest we mislead others by our silence. Right and wrong must not be rationalized nor economized. Honesty and faithfulness must not be determined by whether or not we can get away with it. It is hypocritical to complain about high taxes and government waste while cheating on your income tax returns, passing on the cost of fraudulency to the rest of us. Saint Paul encourages us in whatever is true, honorable, just, pure and pleasing to God. We must practice the virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control on a daily basis to develop our personal integrity.

Our Christian observance of this Advent season is counter-cultural. It is as though there are two Christmases, sacred and secular, held side by side. We hold off singing carols until Christmas, even though we have been hearing them in the department stores for weeks. By the time we reach the Christmas season, the authentic light of Christ will shine brighter than all the artificial lights of the commercial and secular Christmas. The beautiful celebration of the birth of Christ gives us a renewed hope in who we are and where we are headed as a people of God. It

has long been characteristic of our Christian culture to go against the world. We respond to those who live on the margins in a world that urges us to get what we can for ourselves before someone else does. We will not allow the Golden Rule to be corrupted to read, “Do to others before they do to you.”

John the Baptist challenges us to move out of our complacency by making a personal moral inventory. We first have to ask ourselves if we willing to make a real change in the way we live. The best of intentions are for naught unless we follow through. If you are aware of a problem with the way you relate to people, don't give in to the temptation to accept it and think you can't change. If you are rude to people who are rude to you, then you are no better than they.

We can do better by being more understanding and patient with that child or elderly person in our life. We can do better by being more responsive and communicative with a spouse by understanding where they are coming from before making judgments about them. Think before overreacting. Avoid spreading rumors of any kind, whether about other people or about health care reform or global warming. Get the facts. Know that you can be wrong and be willing to admit it. You don't always have to be right. Be willing to agree to disagree. Be slow to accuse and quick to forgive. Be able to say you are sorry and never hesitate to say, “I love you” to the ones you love. We all have the capacity to change and grow. You can't change others; you are the only one who can change yourself. There is no time like the present to bring out the best in you. You and only you have the power to make that happen. It requires commitment, determination and hard work, but it's worth it.

I once read of a road in southern Vermont where many serious accidents occurred because cars and trucks built up speed descending a mountain only to come upon a sudden and dangerously sharp curve where there were frequent accidents. Local residents tried in vain to get the state to straighten the road to prevent future accidents, but nothing was done. Meanwhile, the neighbors kept first aid supplies and blankets to aid those who were injured in accidents until the ambulance arrived. How many injuries and deaths had to happen before they got around to straightening out that road? In the same way, how many times do we damage the feelings of others, intentionally or unintentionally, before causing serious injury to the relationship?

John the Baptist calls us to straighten out the dangerous curves of immorality in our lives and fill in the valleys of injustice to smooth the way for God's righteousness and justice. We must not put off what needs to be changed. When you reach the point where you are really doing something about making life better for yourself – you just might be making it better for someone else.