

December 8 2013

Scripture Lessons ~ *Romans 15: 4-13*

Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon *Bearing Good Fruit*

I think there is still a Dear Abby column in the newspaper, but it is not done by the original Dear Abby, I think it is done by her daughter. Several years ago a young man wrote into the Dear Abby column for some advice about his present employment. The man described himself in the letter that was written as ‘a good Christian’. But then he went on to explain that he was a lobbyist for a large multi-national corporation right out of Washington D.C. and he said in the letter that he liked his job very much for these two reasons. He loved the idea he had the opportunity to influence public policy, and it paid darn well and provided nicely for his family. The only problem he explained from time to time he was called upon to compromise himself when he made back room deals that could sometimes put the welfare of people around him and throughout the country, into jeopardy. His question to Abby then was this, “So you think a person can do what I do for living and still believe in God?” Well I am not sure that I would rely on Dear Abby as the ultimate authority when it comes to theological questions but Abby didn’t even hesitate to answer his question, with a resounding YES. And I suspect that most of us would agree that being a capitol lobbyist doesn’t necessarily give evidence of a lack of faith in God’s existence. Maybe though, the man wasn’t asking that question at all. Maybe he should have asked this question, “Is what I have to do when I compromise the welfare of others to strike some of these backroom bargains in harmony with living a life of faith”? And many of us would have to at least think twice before answering.

Now back to the lesson for today notice what happened in today’s lesson as John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness of Judea. It was kind of a similar situation but he had a different cast of

characters. Many people came to John for baptism confessing their sins and John in return baptized them, but when some of the Pharisees and Sadducees came for baptism notice the tone of the passages change, John becomes a brood of vipers. He said you are a bunch of snakes in the grass! But John did not question the sincerity of the Pharisees and Sadducees belief in God, but he came after them for another reason, for relying too heavily on their status before God as descendants of Abraham considered to be a very favorite status. The quarrel with them was that their daily actions did not match what they professed to believe as religious leaders. So John said “bear fruit that bears repentance” or in other words let your outward life somehow reflect your inward belief in God. John is saying here that baptism in this case would be almost meaningless at best, and more likely almost an insult to God if inward belief and outward action were not somehow married together in the way they lived their lives.

The matter of how we live our lives day by day I think is a very important issue to all of us; we struggle with it day by day. Interestingly a nationwide survey of American college freshman which was conducted recently that people entering college these days are a lot more concerned about material success than they were say 30 years ago. The survey found that 75.6 percent of the polled freshman sited being financially well off, not just meeting needs but financially well off as their top goal, where only 39.4 percent placed a developing a meaningful philosophy of life anywhere near the top of their list of priorities. By a way of comparison in 1971, 82.9 percent offered for the philosophy of life goal in the same survey. Times have changed. And while in no way downplaying earning a living we often times have to admit, oftentimes when we place too high a value on material success, sometimes virtues like honesty and compassion and generosity and service towards others are trampled underfoot. To use John’s metaphor the fruit that befits repentance the good fruit, really doesn’t get much opportunity to come to fruition at all. Now as you well know because we have almost made a caricature out of it, John modeled a very sparse style of living

marked by austere self-denial and abstinence. The bible tells us he wore camelhair and leather and ate locust and wild honey. But he did not demand that others follow that extreme example. But in challenging the Pharisees and Sadducees he made it very clear that when a life that serves primarily to promote self-interest at the expense of those around us we really don't follow a path which is pleasing to God or healthy for the world around us. John's own lifestyle I think a testimony to the importance of avoiding entrapment and too much concern for material possessions and a high status in this world.

Now the word lifestyle conveys a new concept in history. The 1986 edition of Webster's dictionary defines lifestyle as this 'the consistent integrated way of an individual as typified by his manner, attitudes and possessions. That definition seems a lot more complete than others somehow because it recognizes the impact of the way we think, and the people after which we model ourselves and the things in this life that we hold dear on who we become as people of God. Though the word lifestyle is a pretty new one, John the Baptist spoke to the heart of its meaning when he said these sort of harsh words "bear fruit that bears repentance", in other words let your manner and attitude in possessions and all else that characterizes who you are as a person in the way that you live and the way that you speak.

A young woman in the streets that was trapped by an additive lifestyle but because of her church background could sort of carry on a good conversation about faith put it well, and you have heard it before. When I was trying to do it I could talk the talk but I really couldn't walk the walk. I just couldn't do it day by day. Dr. Everett Coop who I think just passed away was our nations former surgeon general he also had a telling comment about this lifestyle. He said "I don't think you can ever separate religious or ethical or moral values from the way you do your job day by day. There are social opportunities and obligations that go with sharing your faith such in my case compassionate care for the sick." John's angry reaction to the Pharisees and the Sadducees I think hang sharply on the

profound inconsistencies between their verbal profession of their faith and the way they eventually ended up living their lives day by day. Using that language of that young woman that I mentioned before saying that they talked the talk, but they didn't walk the walk. I think it's helpful from time to time to remember the lives of people of faith that have been sorely tried but who still bore those fruits of repentance. Their lives can serve as a model of inspiration as we go about doing the same things on our individual journeys of faith. One such contemporary person comes to mind is not Martin Luther King Jr., but Martin Luther King Sr. Do you know anything about his story? The younger King was slain by that assassin's bullet in 1968, but then later on we sort of lose the story and then in 1974 when a young man, who said he was trying to kill who was called Daddy King, shot and killed his wife Alberta. These two deaths I am sure were painful severe blows to Daddy King as we can just imagine, but he later said of the two killers this surprising and refreshing thing. He said these words "I don't hate either one, there is no time for that and there is no reason either. Nothing that a man does takes him lower than when he allows himself to fall so low as to hate anyone". And in his life of faith Daddy King practiced the forgiveness that he preached, and that is a tough one.

John the Baptist challenged the Pharisees and the Sadducees to bear fruit to befit repentance and to live a life in which belief and practice go hand in hand. And so in this season of Advent as we continue to prepare for the good news and coming of Jesus we have got a challenge. Our challenge is the same as for those people in the day of John, we need to both talk the talk and also to walk the walk. Together we say, Amen.