

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Last week's gospel introduced us to John the Baptist. We heard John's message of repentance and its connection to the prophet Isaiah. But there wasn't much meat about what repentance looks like, how it functions, or the purpose of it. But, this week is different as the story continued. We that heard the substance of John's message was, as one colleague put it, "harsh, urgent, and concrete."¹

The harshness began right at the beginning with unapologetic anger as he called the crowd a "brood of vipers." He's saying that these people are like vipers who usually remain together after they're hatched until they mature. But, if something threatens them, they scatter and flee for their lives. It's a comparison drawn between the people fleeing to the wilderness in a time of fear. And he went on to warn them that the being Jewish isn't enough. It's not about generational ties, about who you know, and relying on your ancestry as a sign of divine favor.² It's not about the act of being baptized with water. It's not some "get clean quick" scheme. Repentance is about a total change of heart. And after this harsh beginning, John the Baptist spoke about the urgency. That there is no time to waste. That the ax is literally on the trunk of the tree. That the end is in sight. Repent now.

Harsh – check. Urgent – check. And that leaves us with the concrete aspect of John's message. This came when the crowds began to ask John about

¹ [https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent3c/#Luke3%3A7-18=](https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent3c/#Luke3%3A7-18)
² Amy-Jill Levine, "Luke", *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p.117

what they should do. And John the Baptist gave them three everyday examples of how to bear fruit, of how to be transformed by repentance.

The first example was directed at the crowds: John says, share with your neighbor. This was nothing new. After all, caring for the disadvantaged is a major Jewish teaching. John was not saying give from what you need for survival. He said, give your extras. It's a simple thing. It's a perfectly appropriate way to think about giving to the church, to nonprofits, and to others. Do you have extra time on your hand spent scrolling or binge watching? Then, give some to serve. Do you have extra money beyond what's needed to survive? Then, give it to those who have none.

And this gets at the root cause of injustice in our world. After all, many sectors have shown that we don't have a lack of resources to care for people, but rather we have a problem with distributing it and sharing it. For example, the US Census Bureau estimates that there are approximately 16 million vacant homes³ and the 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report found over 650,000 people lack permanent shelter.⁴ 16 million homes and 650,000 people in need of shelter – not a lack of resources but a distribution issue. Here's another example: The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations found that 32% of all food produced in the world is lost or wasted. In a restaurant, a half a pound of food waste is created for every

³ <https://www.multiphasingnews.com/turning-vacant-housing-into-affordable-housing/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Census%20Bureau%20estimates,housing%20affordability%20and%20neighborhood%20stability>.

⁴ <https://www.security.org/resources/homeless-statistics/#:~:text=The%202023%20AHAR%20reveals%20a%20grim%20truth,people%20in%202023%20reflects%20a%2070%2C642%20increase>.

meal served in a restaurant on average.⁵ But, it doesn't always take a huge change to bring about a shift in food waste. After all, Aramark, the food service provider, conducted a study that showed that by eliminating food trays in dining halls diverted 15 million pounds of food waste in one year.⁶ In short, the act of taking less means less waste. And John preached about this very thing – give your extra. In short, don't hoard.

Next up, John spoke to tax collectors. These people who collaborated with the Romans and profited from the struggle of their own community and neighbors. He told the tax collectors to stop cheating people.

Finally, he spoke to the Roman soldiers and told them not to use threats and false accusations to make money. In short, don't extort.

Ok. If I lost you in the details, come back to me. Here's the recap: John's message was harsh, urgent, and concrete. He said, "don't hoard, don't cheat, and don't extort." And all these examples deal with possessions. They all deal with treating people right. They all deal with justice. For the fruit of repentance is justice. And John is calling them to repentance. Not confession, but repentance. You see, confession is only acknowledging and admitting what you did was wrong. But repentance takes it one step farther. Repentance is the processes of turning away from selfishness and moving toward justice. Confession is naming, and repentance is changing. Confession is saying, "I have more than I need, and I should share it." And

⁵ <https://moveforhunger.org/blog/beyond-menu-food-waste-americas-restaurant-industry#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20National%20Restaurant,food%20than%20they%20can%20eat.>

⁶ <https://www.foodservicedirector.com/foodservice-operations/study-trayless-dining-reduces-food-waste-by-15-million-pounds>

repentance is saying, “Here, I have enough take this for yourself.” Confession is saying, “I need to do better with wasting food.” And repentance is making a change to waste less food for the good of all.

And this is a good message from John. But, remember that this is John and not Jesus. As Dr. Stephanie Crowder puts in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, “This comparison and contrast [between John the Baptist and Jesus] is similar to that of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. Both men had the same goal of racial progress but, because of their different backgrounds, [they used] different methods of achieving this goal. DuBois focused on higher education and civil and political action. Washington concentrated on trade schools and accommodation. Similarly, both John the Baptist and Jesus had the goal of bringing salvation to God’s people. John the Baptist did this through preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus, on the other hand, preached good news to the poor and the year of the Lord’s favor.”⁷ A time characterized by God’s grace, redemption, and restoration.

You see, John the Baptist knew that he was not the Messiah. He knew that he was offering baptism with water, but that Jesus was going to baptize with the Holy Spirit. That Jesus’ ministry was going to be one of fire and wind. That is, Jesus’ ministry was going to one of purifying by separating the wheat from the chaff. And that’s not meant to say “you, wheat, over here with God and you, chaff, go burn in hell.” Rather it’s meant to say that we all need the purification that comes from separating that which is within us that is chaff

⁷ Stephanie Buckhana Crowder, “Luke”, [True to Our Native Land](#), p. 163.

and needs to be burned away from that which is life-giving wheat and should remain. For the messages from John the Baptist and Jesus are both good news. Not in the sense that it will make everyone happy. It's not good news in that injustice and evil acts committed by others are not important. Rather, it's good news in the sense that a new reality is dawning. That much like the blue paraments of the Advent season are like the dark morning sky before dawn breaks, so too we are just on the cusp of a new reality, a new thing, and a new way of being together as God's people. It is the dawn of forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and restoration. It is the dawn of sharing and honesty. Indeed, it is the dawn of God's fullness beginning to take over.

Friends, today's gospel reminds us to take seriously the difference between confession and repentance. John shows us how small acts in everyday life can have a big impact. For we are on the cusp of time when sharing, honesty, and love are all that will be. A time where justice is birthed among us. May we journey toward the manger knowing that our God brings justice. May we remember that we are loved and have been given so much to share. May we be awakened with hope to the day when God's vision is fully birthed on earth. Amen.