

Pastor's Homily – 3rd Sunday of Advent – December 16th 2018

“What should we do?” is the question in today’s Gospel posed by various groups of people to John the Baptist. “What should we do?” is always a question on our minds.

But first, a little joke from an email someone sent me recently entitled: “What should we not do?” And it goes like this:

➔ It’s so good to finally get a health warning that is useful. It involves the shampoo when it runs down your body when you shower with it – a warning to us all! I don’t know why I didn’t figure this out sooner! I use shampoo in the shower. When I wash my hair, the shampoo runs down my whole body, and printed very clearly on the shampoo label is the warning: “For Extra Body and Volume.” No wonder I have been gaining weight! Well, I got rid of that shampoo and I am going to start showering with Dawn dishwashing soap instead. Its label reads: “Dissolves Fat That is Otherwise Difficult to Remove.” Problem solved! If I don’t answer the phone, I’ll be in the shower!”

As I think of the question posed to John the Baptist, I think of a question that some folks have been debating recently in America. In a few weeks, we’ll hear about the “caravan” of the Holy Family fleeing Herod and Bethlehem to Egypt. For the last few months, some news has been about another caravan. “*What should we do*” about the caravan who are traveling through Mexico to the US Border? What should we do? Should we allow these folks into our country? There are very valid reasons (security & economic concerns) for being reluctant to do so. Shouldn’t we have border-security and control over who enters the country? Yet there are Judeo-Christian and humanitarian reasons why we might be open to allowing these folks in. Or should we at least favor the woman and children? It’s a moral, political and spiritual dilemma.

A homily isn’t a forum to answer political issues. But the question itself – “what should we do” – is a valid question to consider *in general* on so many levels facing a multitude of social and political and personal issues. And that’s the focus of this homily from a spiritual perspective.

In today’s Gospel, one group after another want John the Baptist to help them to *know* what they should do. They’ve already been touched by his invitation/challenge to repent and believe the good news. But what’s the next step? There’s no ‘*one-size fits all*’ response. John’s advice is tailored to each according to their circumstances.

Nothing he suggests is very dramatic or extraordinary. If you have extra clothing, well then, share it with those who have less. If you have food, give some to those who are hungry. If you collect money, take only what’s fair and just. And if you have military might, or political power or, any kind of authority, don’t abuse it.

These admonitions seem obvious. There’s not a word about government spending; national security; better education; economic reform; or jumping on the bandwagon of one cause or another. What JOHN basically says is: share what you have; don’t cheat people; don’t bully anyone; be content with what you have. Sounds rather ordinary – doesn’t it? Exactly.

John the Baptist tells everyone to do practical things to prepare for the Messiah. He didn’t tell them to go to the Temple and pray more or to offer large sacrifices. Ritual and prayer will come later. First things first: make some practical changes by responding to the needs of the neighbor. That will prepare them, and us, for the coming Messiah.

“What should we do?” It’s the question we, the baptized, should ask during Advent. Through our baptism, the promise John made, that we would be baptized with “the Holy Spirit and fire” is fulfilled. John was an “old-school” prophet calling people to take a bath, (a shower, as it were) to wash themselves clean of the world’s dirty ways - and to start fresh with the “DAWN” of insight that dissolves the ‘*fat*’ of dis-interest in others.

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Saint John the Baptist understood that we all tend to slide into self-interest – when no one’s watching. I’ll take that slightly bigger piece of the pie if I think I can get away with it. John counsels the opposite approach – take half the piece and give the other half away.

Did everyone who got baptized in the Jordon River STAY as clean and resolved – as they were that day? Probably not. More importantly, do you and I keep ourselves as spiritually sweet on Monday as we present ourselves on Sunday?

So, what should we do? Maybe, like Santa Claus suggests, we should ”make a list,” and check it twice to see how naughty or nice we’ve become. Or, perhaps, I would suggest as Advent homework that we make a list of 3 things we should do – (or do better at) representing the three groups (the crowds in general; the tax collectors; and the soldiers) who inquired – WHAT they should do. Or maybe we should think about the empty crib on the baptismal font and the tangled, disconnected tree lights. Does that scenario reflect the jumbled mess of our distractions at this point in time (or at this time of the year)?

There are so many social and political vexing issues out there in our society, and many worrisome matters within our hearts and families. What should we do in the face of all these realities? The consistent message from John the Baptist to Jesus is always: neighbor, neighbor, neighbor – OTHER focused.

Today, on this Gaudete Sunday, John the Baptist reveals the one and only way to find joy, is namely – *give your neighbor (give someone else) reason to rejoice*. You and I need not feel embarrassed to express our joy in a world full of incredible suffering and horrific evil. Because, done properly, Christian rejoicing does bring “joy to the world.” We rejoice that we have an extra cloak to share with the one who has none. We give generously because we’ve been given so much. We also refrain from getting ahead at the expense of others and we commit ourselves to raising our voices on behalf of those who don’t share in our abundance.

I received a Christmas card yesterday from a Cure of Ars family – with pictures of the kids – and the caption – “the biggest blessings are in the smallest moments.” Yes – just being together as “neighbor” with and for others.

The point of the shampoo joke is read the labels carefully – “Dawn” dissolves fat – that is otherwise hard to remove.” As the Baptist promised, the Spirit will surely come with cleansing and renewing fire.

The point of the Gospel – What should we do? Help dissolve the fat of disinterest and instead – give others – reason to rejoice.

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