

The Soul Felt Its Worth
Luke 3:7-18
Northminster Presbyterian
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Okay....Brood of vipers....clearly John is not going to be asked to write the stewardship letter next year...One gets the impression that he spends too much time reading his Facebook feed or watching the 24-hour news cycle...Or maybe he just needs a Snickers bar...living on locusts in the wilderness can make you hangry...

But John is faced with the reality of a culture that has gotten turned upside down. Everyone who is successful is a collaborator in the Roman Occupation. A "get mine before they take everything" attitude appears to have taken hold...and the leaders...don't get John started on the leaders... Can you relate?

But if we can get passed his frustrations at how people are living and his failure as a church greeter...what does John have to say to us 2000 years later, here halfway through the Advent journey?

Well, if we want to get as far away from that opening as possible...let's start at the ending "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

Um, huh, I'm not sure I'm feeling any better....burning with unquenchable fire is "good news" is Gospel?

Something doesn't fit....and it certainly doesn't seem like the kind of message we'd want to hear in this season that is supposed to be about joy and love. So, what's going on here?

First, let me make one admission...This text is not new to me. You don't grow up Southern Baptist without hearing this text...a lot. And growing up, I was taught that this passage was about precisely what it seems to appear at first glance—this is John's prophecy about Jesus coming to be judge of the

world, about the division of the people of earth into the saved and the unsaved...the wheat and the chaff...and about the fiery pit of hell that awaits all who do not accept Jesus as their personal savior...Well....Ho, Ho, Ho....Merry Christmas!

To be honest, I grew to really detest this text...it seemed to speak of a God that was inconsistent with my experience...it seemed so at odds with the Good News that Jesus came to talk about...it seemed to be a text that wasn't about love and joy and good news....but one to inspire fear, and what many call "golden ticket" theology...The idea that the most important thing in our lives...the goal of life and faith is to escape hell....It seemed to speak of a God that said...love me or die....And try as I might....I couldn't find love there.

I can't remember who first pointed it out to me...I'm sure I couldn't have come up with it on my own...but it really is fairly obvious....It's right there in the chief metaphor of this passage....wheat and chaff.

When you harvest wheat, there is the stalk and the head. The first thing you do is to get rid of the stalk. At this point the wheat is still full of chaff - the fibrous outer shell that surrounds each kernel of wheat on the head. And each kernel is stuck tight inside its shell...like a peanut inside its shell. Particularly in ancient forms of wheat, something had to be done to break that kernel out of its shell...to get to the valuable source of bread—the staple of life...You do this by banging the kernels together or agitating them in some way and then throwing everything into the wind where the wheat is a lot heavier than the chaff so it falls to the ground first. The chaff is blown away.

Did you catch it...the chaff and the wheat....THEY ARE PART OF THE SAME PLANT...On a single stalk you find both wheat and chaff. John and Luke would have known this surely. So where on earth did we get the idea that some people are wheat and some people are chaff? If all this talk about wheat and chaff is about us...doesn't it make more sense to say that each of us is made up of both wheat and chaff? That there is at the core of every human being something valuable... something life-giving, something that can be used to feed a world that hungers not just for food, but for love, for peace, for justice...

What if John is pointing to Jesus not as the one who will condemn the unrighteous of the world...but as the one who will come to free us from the shells of division and arrogance and fear and hatred and pain that have grown around that good fruit of truth and justice that lies within each of us? It makes me want to go back to my Sunday School teachers, or go into a number of our sister churches and ask...What if Christ comes not to burn some of us in the eternal fires of hell...but to prepare us...to gather us...the wheat together...so that we may be transformed into life-giving bread for all the world, so that we might bear good fruit.

And suddenly this story looks completely different. What about that section at the beginning when John rails against those who come to him apparently confident that their status before God is superior? They lay claim to the covenant with Abraham and cling to their status as chosen. They claim to be separate and different...more blessed than their Gentile brothers and sisters.

And John says...NO...you are wheat and chaff just like everybody else. You need the thresher to break you out of your shell just like everyone else... You need to have all of that that you cling to out of fear that you are somehow inadequate or not enough broken away to reveal your truest, best selves.

And suddenly, it seems, John isn't talking to the Jews on the Jordan anymore...and he isn't letting anyone point fingers about who might be chafe and who might be wheat...and is saying within each of you that which is enough? You just have to get rid of all that gunk on the outside.

So John's radical inclusiveness has two sides: yes...it brings everyone the joy of knowing God's grace and submersion in the Jordan signifies it; but it also demands of all nothing less than a change of behavior.

Remember that other section?...John's three responses to the questions what are we to do? To all he says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To the tax collectors, "Collect no more than the amount owed you." To the mercenaries (the hired guns of the temple and the local authorities), "Don't exploit your positions through extortion and intimidation...be satisfied with your wages."

John's answers are an image of the Kingdom of God...where charity and fidelity are the dominant ethical standards...where the greatest evil to be avoided seems to be the exploitation of others or of one's power and position.

For John it seems, repentance never means remorse alone, but also entails a change away from one way of being toward another way of being. John seems to be teaching that fruit is what counts. The chaff is important primarily for what it prevents the kernel from being...

But isn't that dangerous...doesn't that take us awfully close to works righteousness? Not if we take John's analogy of Christ as the thresher seriously...The transformation from chaff encrusted head to life sustaining kernel is one the wheat can never accomplish on its own...the shell is too tight.

Both John and Luke seem to recognize that the wheat kernels need the thresher, just as we need Christ, to break away those things we cling to that separate us from God, from one another and from our true potential. They are not something we can break out of on our own. Rather, having been freed from them by the loving act of the thresher...the Christ....We are freed to be different...to build lives together of integrity and justice....of charity and joy.

And every time we share what we have with the others, through the giving of food or money...for stockings for the youth at The Night Ministry, or presents for folks on the giving tree...every time we share ourselves and our time, or stand in solidarity with our Islamic brother and sisters as they face threatening action from a fearful populace, or volunteer with Family Promise, or sing carols to folks who are not having the best holiday season...every time we do any of these things, we are demonstrating that we understand this relationship we have with Christ, and we are living into the promise God finds in each of us. Through the good fruits of our work in Jesus name—not just through good works, but through lives lived with integrity and a commitment to justice—we are telling the great thresher, "We get it," and we honor the one who freed us for these great possibilities.

Ultimately then, perhaps this text reminds us that Advent is a time to reflect in gratitude on the One who comes...the one who has been and is grinding

the chaff from our lives and burning it away, leaving us free...free from those wants and desires and barriers that keep us from recognizing and embracing the love of God; free to bear the good fruits of righteousness, love, peace and, yes, joy. And what do you know, that cleansing fire is indeed good news. Thanks be to God.