

Do the Good That is Yours to Do
Luke 3:7-16
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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A few weeks ago I shared these words from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:
Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

I often remind myself of these words. Because, friends, it can be overwhelming. The needs of the world are numerous. And sometimes it feels like there isn't enough time or energy, enough money or food, enough justice or joy to address all of them. Sometimes it feels so big that our response is to bury our heads in the sand, to put on our blinders, to not do *anything* because we can't do *everything*.

And yet, what if we remembered that while we can't do everything, *we can do something*? In fact, we are called to do the good that is ours to do.

Before Jesus began his public ministry, we heard about John the Baptist. John, a relative of Jesus, is known in scripture and Christian tradition as the one who came to prepare the way for Jesus. And sometimes because we think of him that way, we forget to really listen to him, to acknowledge the ministry he was doing. Instead we see him and we move on as we prepare to meet Jesus.

But today I want to let us sit with this story about John for a minute. And maybe the best place to start is with the way Eugene Peterson translates the opening verse in *The Message*. The beginning of this passage in *The Message* says, "When crowds came because it was the popular thing to do..."

We miss that because in more traditional versions we simply hear that the crowds were coming to be baptized. And then, quite suddenly - or so it seems to us, John is calling them "broods of vipers" (Luke 3:7, NRSVUE). And often we then stop reading - we feel like this John guy is a street preacher with a megaphone pointing out everyone's sins.

But if we really listen, what we hear John saying is that faith isn't about a single act like baptism, it isn't about our heritage, but faith is about what we do for and to other people. It is about how we live in this world. It is about how we share the compassion and love that God has shared with us.

So, after cautioning the people away from just assuming that baptism was their answer or that because they were children of Abraham they could coast along on their ancestral coat tails, someone asked John, "What should we do?"

And did you notice his answer? Or actually, answers.

Did you hear that? He didn't have just one answer.

First, he answers generally to the crowd. After all, there are things any of us could do, and that if we are paying attention to our fellow human beings, should do, hopefully would do. John said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11, NRSVUE).

In other words, when you have more than you need and someone else has less, share. It's a simple instruction that any of us is capable of.

But did you notice that there was more conversation here? Because then a few other people, people who came from certain groups and held certain jobs, asked more specifically what was expected of them. A tax collector asked, "What about us?" to which John answered that they should collect the money that was owed but no more. After all, tax collectors commonly added their own fee on top of the taxes due. Similarly came a question from a soldier. And again John answered with a very specific instruction that pertained to the common practices of soldiers.

It seems John realized that we all had purpose, we all had behaviors that could change, *and* we all had good to do in the world. And John encouraged people accordingly. "This is the good that is yours to do," he likely said again and again.

And this is what Jesus was about as well. After all, John and Jesus both grew up in the same Jewish faith. And that faith, as we hear from prophets like Micah and Amos, and from people in the Hebrew Scriptures like Esther and Moses, faith is something that should carry us forward to do the good that is ours to do in the time and place where we find ourselves.

And, inevitably, Jesus heard these words from the beginning of his life. As Mary continued to reflect on the words of the angel who said that her child would be great and would reign forever (Luke 1:32-33), as she continued to watch Jesus grow up and discern his own calling, she inevitably continued to point him into the world saying, "Wherever you find yourself, do the good that is yours to do." And in Jesus' life we see the same, as he looks people in the eye, notices who they are, and encourages them to live fully the life for which they are designed.

So, I wonder - if you turned to John or to Jesus and said, "What should I do?" - what would the answer be?

In our recent conversation about this text at Bible Study, someone's comment was that whatever the answer is, it will probably make them uncomfortable. And, that is probably true, because while there are many lovely things we can do and while we will and likely should keep doing them, there is also something special for you to do. There is something for which you are particularly called and gifted.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner, HarperOne, 1993).

When you discern that place, then you will discover the good that is yours to do. Because, one thing that is always true - this calling, this good that is ours, is always about safeguarding community.

Do the good that is yours to do. These are words not only from the beginning of Jesus' life or John's ministry, but they are words for the beginning of each new day in our lives, of each new year, of each opportunity.

I wonder - what would be different if this phrase were written in our hearts so that we were always watching for the places for which we are gifted and called?

I wonder - what would the year ahead look like, for us personally and as a congregation - if we gave real attention to this discernment?

I wonder - what is the good that is yours...that is ours to do?

May we see it. May we do it. May we live with a commitment to it. Amen.