

Ancestry Won't Do It!

Luke 3:7-18

December 13, 2009

Considering that the authors of the scriptures were only able to give us snippets into the lives of the persons with whom they conveyed the biblical story, John the Baptist had to have been a real character. Calling people who were curious enough about his work to endure the challenging wilderness setting a bunch of snakes – seemingly questioning their motivation for seeking the rite of initiation he performed – calling them on their lifestyles and ancestry, what was with this guy?

What concerned John was the lack of lifestyle changing going on despite people's admitting their wrongful living. What concerned him was that people were seeking to be baptized without any association with the need to change their ways. What concerned him was that people thought who their mommies and daddies were, who their ancestors were, was enough – was validation of their faith. John was concerned about people believing their religious and racial bloodlines, heritage, justified them. What concerned him was the lack of fruitbearing resulting from their repenting.

C. David McKirachan noted in his "Genetic Obsession" sermon: "There was nothing wrong with the Israelites believing the Lord's willingness to claim them and liberate them and offer rules for being something other than the same old clan scrambling for a bigger piece of the pie. They were proud of that, and then they went further and turned the most revolutionary inspiration in the history of the human race into a system of exclusion and legalistic judgment. Their blood relationships were more of a source of pride than their commitments to each other and to the sojourner in their midst. So instead of being a light to the nations they became a bottleneck with a fancy title."¹

Folks, the church - we Christians – come close at times to having some similar attitudes about the role of our ancestry. Sometimes we can be pretty exclusionary. Sometimes we act as if the faith of our parents or grandparents has paved the way for us and we don't have to make any faith decision for ourselves or fulfill any membership vows in our lives. Ancestry won't do it, friends! It's about repenting and acting on that repentance.

Now, there's no question that our society has abused the concept of repentance. It's really a pretty significant, liberating, important theological idea. One that should fill us with hope. It is good news that we don't have to stay the same – that we don't have to be held captive by our past – our wrongdoing – our failures. The really good news is that we can be rid of the stranglehold guilt applies to our self-concept. We can begin again. We can start over.²

Dr. J. Kalas explains it this way in one of his sermons: "Every life accumulates a certain amount of rubbish. No matter how earnestly and thoughtfully we live, we make mistakes – if not outright sins. In time, our sins, stupidities, and poor choices can become like a mountain around us, until we spend endless waking hours in the miserable enterprise of regret. Thanks be to God, there is something better than haunting regret. Regret, you see, leads nowhere. It is a sea of misery in which we can wallow and fret until it destroys us. But repentance is a gift from God – a wholesome way to look the past in the eye, confess it for what it is, and leave it behind. On, then, to a new start. Perhaps that's why people were drawn to John the Baptizer. They felt hope when they heard him preach."³

John's message wasn't for the purpose of some report looking good on the ledgers of the annual conference. John knew that misconceptions were spreading about what he was saying and doing. He knew some saw his way as an easy religion.

John knew that he had to nip the misconceptions in the bud if he was going to keep his message pure and ready those who heard him for the coming one. There'd be no false teachings for him – no watering down the gospel so that more people would respond.

John recognized in the desert crowd that day were some who'd come seeking the sign of forgiveness, baptism, without the cleansing experience of repentance. They wanted a magic show and John wouldn't have it. He said they didn't show the signs or bear the fruits of repentance and therefore shouldn't expect to receive the sign of baptism either.

“What then should we do, John?” those in the crowd asked. Their desire for repentance was so strong – they so desired to turn their lives around – to be rid of the stranglehold guilt had on them that they were hungry for whatever this crazed desert wanderer had to dish out. John sensed their sincerity and obliged.

“Share.” That's what he first told them to do. “If you have, give.” John wasn't interested in having a debate about why some people were needy. He offered no qualifying words about “their” souls – “their” behavior – “their” selfishness – “their” laziness – “their” whatever. His answer wasn't for “their” sake, it was for the inquirer's, ours, the repentant individual's. We are to share because our salvation depends on it, not “theirs.” From a repentant spirit comes a desire to share and to give. If sharing and giving aren't part of our lives, repentance hasn't been completed.

Now, some of the potential baptizees were tax collectors. They sensed they were in trouble. So they sought for some specifics by which they could measure their lives. Tax collectors made their living off of overcharging. And so, John instructed them to: “Do your job honestly. Don't collect more than you are required to.”

Some soldiers got concerned and called out to him for some advice about how they could bear fruits in the roles they played in society. And John said, “Don't rob people. Don't abuse your power. Don't arrest people illegally.”

I think it's significant that John told those who inquired of him how they could be faithful, bear fruit, where they were – in the jobs they already held. He didn't tell them to go find another career where it would be easier for them to put into practice their repentance. He told them to be faithful in whatever setting they found themselves.

The message for all of us today is “our ancestry isn't where it's at” either. We are called – challenged – to bear fruit by living our lives honestly. We are called not to abuse our power. We are called to honor Christ by doing what we should in the day-to-day marketplaces where we live and work. The repentant life is as simple as sharing a coat or a meal and not swindling people when we do business with them.

John the Baptist truly sounds a clear warning to our generation just as he did to the crowd gathered around him in the desert that day. We are only fooling ourselves if we think that we can live a life of piety without a life of ethics. We dare not lull ourselves into a religion that spends most of its time talking and performing religious rituals, while neglecting to make changes in how we treat others. We cannot claim God's blessings for

ourselves without also sharing them with other people. We cannot point our fingers at the sins and shortcomings of other people while ignoring our own need for God's grace and God's forgiveness.

Ancestry is not enough. It's not where it's at. Bearing fruits worthy of repentance is. Let us pray.

1. C. David McKirachan, "Genetic Obsession," *StoryShare*, December 13, 2009 (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2009).
2. J. Ellsworth Kalas, "The Divine Opportunity," Sermons on the Gospel Readings, Cycle C (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 0-7880-1968-6a.
3. Ibid.