

Gentleness

December 15, 2024

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

That seems like such a wonderful text as a basis for a sermon entitled, “Gentleness.”

It’s a pity that I’m preaching from the Gospel of Luke, isn’t it?

“John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?’”

Isn’t that gentle?

Well, no. Calling people snakes, especially in a religious context where “snake” summons up the memory of the snake that deceived Eve, is not gentle. “Who warned you?” is an accusation, and “the coming wrath” implies that we, those who have been addressed, have done something that will bring wrath upon us.

In other words, “You’re snakes, you’ve earned some fearful fate, and I can’t believe you were smart enough to heed a warning.”

Not gentle.

So... why were they there?

Melissa Bane Sevier writes in her blog, “So, all these people were coming to hear John and he called them a bunch of snakes. Not very welcoming. I have no idea why they didn’t just slither back to their homes to get away from his venomous rantings. There had to be something in his words that appealed to them, though, or they wouldn’t have kept coming in droves.”

John was a big name in the first century. When the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote *The Jewish War* around the same time Luke was writing his Gospel, he gave John the Baptist three times as much space as he gave Jesus. In our day, I suppose we’d call John an influencer. His reputation drew people down to the riverbank from nearby Jericho, from Jerusalem at the top of the ridge, and all the way from Galilee. John packed them in even as he called them vipers.

When John answered the question, “What should we do?” however, he was a lot more gentle. In fact, he had a very light touch. The hardest thing he said was to give up a coat if you had two. As Richard w. Swanson writes in his blog, *ProvokingTheGospel*, “This isn’t a call to become a minimalist, however. John is simply saying that everyone needs a coat, and if you have to look like a ‘minimalist’ to get that done, then share your extra coat. We all need a coat.”

We all need a coat.

Then there are the other two groups. The soldiers are almost certainly not Roman legionnaires. These are the local soldiers, and we’d probably think of them more as police officers. They’re the ones who guard the officials, the ones who break up the fights, the ones who bring the defendants to face their judges. What’s the great temptation to poorly paid people given authority and weapons? It’s simple: “Pay me or I’ll have you charged. Pay me or I’ll beat you up.”

John’s prescription: Don’t do that. Be content with your pay. It’s not complicated.

What about the tax collectors, though? They did represent the foreign occupiers, even did their dirty work for them. First century Jews, along with a lot of other residents (but not citizens) of the Roman Empire, deeply resented Roman taxes and their agents. The third century *Tosefta*, which like the Mishnah recorded a lot of the thinking of the first century rabbis, states that a visit from a tax collector would render a house ritually unclean. You’d expect that John’s directions to those people would go something like this: “Give it up. Do something else. Stop.”

Instead: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

John’s bark was a lot worse than his bite.

That might be a clue to his popularity. Yes, John’s rhetoric was harsh, but his advice was clear, direct, practical, possible, and dare I say it? Gentle. As David Lose writes at *Working Preacher*, “This feels more like the stuff of Kindergarten than Apocalypse. Which may be Luke’s point. Fidelity does not have to be heroic. There are opportunities to do God’s will, to be God’s people, all around us. These opportunities are shaped by our context: the roles in which we find ourselves and the needs of the neighbor with which we are confronted. But make no mistake, opportunities abound.”

They came to John because they knew things weren’t right in the world. They came because they had lots of explanations for why things weren’t right, but they weren’t sure whether those explanations made sense, and they weren’t sure what to do about it if they’d known. They came because so much seemed beyond their power and their reach. They came because they were tired of being stuck in the wrongness, and they wanted to be part of the improvement toward right.

What should we do?

Like the nene who wanted to change the world, we start with ourselves. How can we, as Paul put it, let our gentleness be known to everyone? How can we see that we do not abuse the power entrusted to us by position, custom, or election? How can we see that we do not pursue our wealth and welfare to the harm of others? How can we see that everyone has a coat?

As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, “What John is daring to suggest to his listeners is that holiness is not the ethereal and mysterious thing we tend to make it. If we're willing to look closely, if we're willing to believe that nothing in our lives is too mundane or secular for God, then we'll understand that all the possibilities for salvation we need are embedded in the lives God has already given us. There is no ‘outside.’ We don't have to look ‘out there.’ The kingdom of heaven is here, within and among us.”

We all need a coat.

We start with ourselves because it's better for us as well. I've borne the awareness of guilt a few times in my life – more than a few times – and it's a burden. It's a burden because I don't like to be less than the person I want to be. It's a burden because it takes up room in my soul that I'd like to give to something else, like awareness of God's grace. It's a burden because I try to justify this thing I know I shouldn't have done, and that just gives me a brain spinning to no purpose.

That's brought me to my own equivalents of a grouchy preacher speaking by a shallow river, because of the possibility that a confession and washing might just send that burden floating, then sinking, into the current, disappearing downstream, out of sight, and at last out of mind. The crowds came to ask, “What should we do?” but they also came so that they could do those things with freed spirits. As Troy Troftgruben writes at Working Preacher, “John's message is more constructive than condemning—and more expansive than excluding. Repentance in Luke, after all, leads to joy and a life better aligned with God's purpose. And that is good news.”

What should we do?

Be gentle first with ourselves. This is the gentleness, though, that faces reality and does not deny it. This is the gentleness that changes the bandages on the wounds even though it hurts. This is the gentleness that takes the soft brush to the grimy fingers so that the dirt comes free but does not break the skin. This is the gentleness that knows that however painful it is to face the sins of our soul, it is less painful than carrying those burdens, and that forgiveness brings joy.

Brings joy.

Be gentle as well with those around. I still don't know how John got away with calling people snakes, but clearly he knew his neighbors better than I. Be gentle because you offer healing

more than correction. You offer an opportunity to live better rather than a summons to self-destruction. You offer the promise of grace.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The world wasn't gentle with John, or with Jesus who came after. It hasn't been gentle with a lot of people who came calling for repentance and declaring forgiveness. Not gentle at all.

May our gentleness be known to all.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson