

Advent 03 C 2018  
December 16, 2018 :: Luke 3:7-18  
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## *“An Unorthodox Orthodoxy.”*

A few years ago, a survey was undertaken to ask parents what values they wanted to teach their kids. Honesty topped the charts at 43%. Kindness was next at 29%. And a strong work ethic came in third, at 11%. Now, what I found really interesting about this, is those three values made an appearance in our gospel reading.

In that gospel reading, we were introduced to John the Baptist. He was an unorthodox person in appearance, being described elsewhere as wearing “a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Matthew 3:3). But he was also unorthodox in his people skills; we got a sample of that in our gospel reading.

But it was his people skills that got me wondering about what it would look like if we tried to adopt John’s way with words. In my mind’s eye it might look something like this. The priest would address the congregation with these words: “The Lord be with you, you brood of vipers!” And the congregation would respond: “And also with you, you whitewashed tomb!”

Maybe not. But even if we are put off by John's appearance, or by his people skills, there's still some good stuff that he's able to teach us, and we'll find it in the middle of our gospel reading.

So, apparently John was a popular teacher and preacher, and large crowds of people were coming from all over to hear him. And after calling them a "brood of vipers," and then warning them against relying on things that may not ultimately matter, John is asked the same question by three groups of people.

The first group of people is basically just "the crowd" in general. And they ask John: "What then should we do?" I mean, if we can't rely on the things we've always relied on, to be in God's good graces, what then should we do? And John says to them: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Now, it seems to me, that the behavior John is describing sounds an awful lot like the virtue of kindness that was mentioned in the survey I referenced a moment ago. That's interesting.

And then, another group of people ask John the same question. But, this time, we're told that it's a group of tax

collectors. Tax collectors were not popular in those days, because they got rich by forcing people to pay more in taxes than the laws prescribed. And so, they ask John: “Teacher, what should we do?” And John says: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

And did you notice that this behavior sounds an awful lot like the virtue of honesty that was mentioned in the survey?

And then, a third group appears, made up entirely of soldiers. They weren’t very popular either. Because if you had something they wanted, they would just take it. Because they were big, strong, and carried deadly weapons. And so, those soldiers ask John, “And we, what should we do?” And John replies, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

And, again, the behavior that John is describing, sounds an awful lot like the strong work ethic mentioned in that survey.

And so, while we may on occasion be tempted to dismiss John the Baptist out of hand, either because of his unorthodox appearance, or his questionable people skills, nevertheless he still

has some things of value to offer us: and that is the ethic of a life lived with, and marked by, honesty, kindness, and a strong work ethic. And that's not bad.

But last Wednesday, at the 10:00 AM Chapel Eucharist, we were talking about all this. And when I had finished with my *ad-lib* homily, one of the women present, said: "I just wish that love had been mentioned in all this."

And that got me wondering about something I'd said in my sermon last week. There I said that "love might be described as a commitment to seek unfailingly the good of another." And that's when it occurred to me that love — *agape* love, that love that seeks unfailingly the good of another — is the soil (if you will) in which we plant the seeds that will one day grow into the virtues of honesty, and generosity, and kindness, and so forth.

And that reminded me of a poem I encountered many years ago. It was written in 1954 by Dorothy Law Nolte, an American writer, and a family counselor. I'm sure you've heard the poem, but it's worth revisiting. It's entitled "Children Learn What They Live," and it goes like this:

“If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

“If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

“If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.

“If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.

“If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.

“If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.”

And,

“If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.”

However,

“If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

“If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.

“If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.

“If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.

“If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

“If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.

“If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.

“If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.

“If children live with fairness, they learn justice.

“If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.

“If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.”

And, finally,

“If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.”

End of poem. Okay, two thoughts come immediately to mind. First, not only does this poem provide us with good advice for how to treat our children, but it's also good advice on how to treat the adults around us. Because people are never too old to learn, to change, or to grow.

And the second thought is this: That what Dorothy Law Nolte said in about 200 words, and what John the Baptist expressed in about 20, make the very same point: How we treat people matters, and can have long-lasting effects.

And so, here is the Good News: While we **may** encounter and experience the Kingdom of God in the *extraordinary* actions and deeds of valiant men and women who stand against evil and strive for the good, we are **certain** to encounter and experience the Kingdom of God in the *ordinary* acts of sharing what we have, of being honest with each other, and by working hard and resisting the urge to be a bully.

And so, and finally, what this means for all of us, on this third Sunday in Advent, is that we will have plenty of chances to be the ordinary saints that John the Baptist calls us to be. That is, to be ordinary men and women, performing extraordinary acts of kindness and decency, of goodness and generosity, and of acceptance and welcoming, because we know that through such measures, and with the grace of God, we can change the world.

Amen.