

What Then Should We Do?

Part 3 of Sermon Series: *Living In Between*

a sermon based on

Luke 3:7-18

and delivered on

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Last week, when I stood here and talked about our need for repentance and the need for self-reflection – and that when someone points out an area of growth that it can be done without shaming, I knew there was a bit of an irony when the next sentence in Scripture, John the Baptist called the people who came to be baptized a “brood of vipers” (Lk 3:7). That sort of sounds like shaming. Doesn’t it? So what gives?

Am I safe in assuming that most of us don’t worry much about vipers day to day. There are pit vipers – Timber rattlers and cottonmouths – in Illinois. But they’re not very common – especially in this part of the state.

But in the Mid-East and Central Asia – vipers (several species) are a real threat. Especially back in biblical days. John was preaching in rocky terrain well suited for snakes. The people didn’t live in four bedroom, two car garage homes in nicely manicured subdivisions. Most people were fortunate if they had a two room home made of either stones or mud bricks. Caves or rocky outcroppings would have served as their outbuildings – and sometimes homes. Places that snakes like to gather into their broods. Although many of those species can grow to about two and a half feet long – that’s still fairly small – and only for the full-grown ones. Vipers could be anywhere. So you always had to be on the watch – lest you stumble upon one and get that quick painful bite.

Having to be on guard like that steals the joy from life, because you always have to be alert for something dangerous. Vipers steal joy from life. Could that be what John meant? Even though in Luke’s account we here that John said to the crowds, “You brood of vipers,” in Matthew’s account (Mt 3:7) he’s directing that comment to the many Pharisees and Sadducees that he sees among the crowd. The Sadducees were aristocrats from the priestly classes. Their focus was on getting people to behave and to honor the sacrifices. The Pharisees on the other hand really did strive to live holy lives and Jesus probably agreed with them more than we generally find in Scripture (because it’s the disagreements that need correcting). The Pharisees were all about keeping the Law – obeying God’s commands. Which is good. Except...

Except that they added rules. Jesus points that out in Mark chapter seven when after quoting the prophet Isaiah 29:13 “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines,” he then goes on to say, “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” (Mk 7:6-8) What Jesus is talking about here are what biblical scholars call “hedge laws.” Hedge laws are rules that started out with good intent. Their purpose is to set up an extra barrier to inadvertently breaking one of God’s commands.

An example would be the food restrictions. Most of you know that kosher rules prevent meat and dairy from being served together. In fact households will even use different dishes and utensils for meat or dairy. The scriptural command found twice in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy says, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” (Ex 23:19, Ex 34:26, Deut 14:21) That’s pretty specific. It probably is safe to think that it applies to a calf also. But it never forbids any combination of dairy and meat; only when that relationship existed, between dinner and its mother. Therefore, the proscription for not eating meat and dairy together comes so that one would not accidentally boil a kid in its own mother’s milk. Sounds reasonable. Doesn’t it? But these hedge laws get broader and broader until cheesy chicken casserole falls outside those rules. Anyone ever seen a chicken that gives milk?

I am not trying to ridicule Jewish dietary laws. The people who follow those rules do so to please God. And there is a lot of nuance in those rules, that we really don’t have time to delve into here. Furthermore, those rules really are meant to avoid inadvertently disobeying God. That’s a good thing. So please, take this as the superficial (and a bit clumsy) attempt to explain how hedge laws develop that it is. It’s not something that was unique to ancient Judaism. It

seems to be a cultural universal. Sort of like the fundamentalist Christian prohibition on premarital sex, because it might lead to dancing.

The problem that existed was that some people in their attempts to be holy kept adding more and more rules, not just for themselves but demanding that others follow them as well. There were so many rules, that it would be easy to inadvertently run afoul of one or another and be scandalized for it. Even though you never really violated God's command. That's what John was talking about when he called them a brood of vipers.

John was calling out the "holier than thou" folks for stealing the joy of life and loving God from people. "Don't tell me you have Abraham as your ancestor" (Lk 3:8b), that is that you have the Law as a birthright. That's not how you live lives worthy of repentance.

So the people say what should we do? And John's answer is pretty simple. Be fair with one another. If you have two coats, don't be stingy with it when you see someone who doesn't have one at all. If you're a tax collector, take only what the law requires. If you're a soldier, don't use threats to get things out of people. Ultimately, he says, "Treat one another fairly. As a sign of respect."

Here's some good news that might not be readily apparent. In his instructions we discover that John was sharing God's promise of salvation for everyone, the Israelite with two coats, the collaborating tax collector, and the Gentile soldier. Through John, God was inviting everyone who would hear to receive his promise of salvation, a promise that John himself acknowledged was way beyond his capabilities, but which was coming in Jesus.

Jesus offers that same sort of promise today. He offers it for people who may be easy to dismiss. When we look even to the local news this week we discover that what we see doesn't always reflect what's behind the front door. There was the news of the "devoted" parents, now accused of medical child abuse in Winnebago; the women arrested on prostitution charges in Belvidere. It would be easy to dismiss all of these souls. But what don't we know?

My first reaction to the prostitution arrests was "Why these women?" I know that most prostitutes don't do so willingly. Most prostitutes are victims of human trafficking. They are forced and manipulated into lives that "proper" society calls shameful. So it's easy to dismiss these victims of their pimps, madams and johns – who don't seem to get arrested as often. We see it when ICE raids a workplace and undocumented WORKERS are rounded up, but the employers taking advantage of workers who can't complain about low wages or safety violations – maybe a slap on the wrist.

But that same God who's promise of salvation John shared with the crowds gathered around the Jordan river, that same God who loved all of those people, continues to love all people now. He invites us through his Son, Jesus Christ to claim that love for ourselves and one another.

What then shall we do as we prepare for his arrival when he comes again – and even in this season when we prepare to celebrate his humble arrival to insignificant parents in the little town of Bethlehem so many years ago? Be fair. If you look at all of the laws in Scripture about how we are to treat one another that's really what they say. Love your neighbor as yourself equals treat all people with the dignity of being created in the image of God and don't burden them with extra rules that steal joy from life.

Be fair. Don't dismiss someone out of hand because their lifestyle doesn't fully agree with societies rule. Ask yourself who has been bitten by the viper? Has he or she had joy stolen as a victim forced into shame? Then treat that one with dignity.

One of the wonderful things about the run up to Christmas Day is that so many people do try to be more generous and cheerful. Just yesterday, as I sat at a stop light on my way to do a hospital visit, the guy in the car next to me shouted, "Merry Christmas." That simple awareness of what lies on our calendars just a bit over a week away helps to restore the joy that can be so easily stolen.

But Jesus frees us for joy. Jesus frees us from having to worry about all the inadvertent slips that might happen if we're not always on guard. Jesus frees us with the knowledge that all he expects is that we love God, by loving – by being fair – to one another, and his assurance that when we do screw up and sin, that he's ready to forgive. AMEN.