

Picture this: John the Baptist, presidential candidate! Here's the opening line for his speeches, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

Politicians usually butter up their audiences, not criticize them. He doesn't stand a chance! But he goes on, and let me creatively reinterpret him here: Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We are Americans, God's chosen nation on the earth'; for I tell you, God is able from these dumb rocks to raise up a nation more faithful than you! Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

No, our boy John doesn't stand a chance in an election. But interestingly the crowds come flocking to him. And they ask, "What then should we do?" John has some very interesting advice for them, and for us as we head ever closer to Christmas. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

We have to put this advice into context and remember most in these crowds have a subsistence life. They go from day to day earning enough to feed themselves one day in order to survive to work again the next day. Resources were very limited and everything took tremendous amounts of time. You didn't go to the local mall to get a coat. To get a coat most people started by shearing a sheep. Everything was hard work, and having two coats was a sign of great excess. If you have two coats share with someone who doesn't have one at all.

John is not suggesting a welfare state here. He's preaching to a crowd of hard working people who struggle to survive. He wants them to work as a community, not a bunch of competing individuals.

Few in our country live that way today. But the next people who ask him for advice do mirror our lives. Tax collectors asked, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

I think the gospel highlights these two groups because both were potentially controversial. Tax collectors were hated because they worked for the Romans - collecting Roman taxes from the subsistence living peasants and handing it over to the Romans so they could continue to pay for the armies that occupied the land. From the point of view of most average Jews they were being forced to finance their country's own occupation.

And then of course there were the soldiers themselves. No one knows exactly who these soldiers were. Many interpreters think they must have been Jewish soldiers in the employ of Herod, but they could have also been Roman soldiers. Whoever they were, we would expect a firebrand like John to tell them off for what they are doing. We would expect John the Baptist to tell both the tax collectors and the soldiers to leave their occupations - stop doing what is against God's will and start living otherwise. But John does not do that.

Tax collectors were notoriously corrupt. They were expected to take a small portion as a salary for their work. But they usually took a far bigger cut than they should. Soldiers were known for taking what they wanted whenever they wanted. Perhaps it would be fair to say that soldiers were

often paid so poorly that stealing from the populace was considered part of their wages.

Yet John does not tell these people to change careers. Instead he tells tax collectors to take only what is prescribed for them and soldiers to be content with their wages. In other words, don't use your positions of power to take advantage of other people.

Last week I told you John's message of economics that would make us feel guilty would come today, and here we have it. We are people of power and privilege. Our standard of living comes largely by exploiting other people - whether it be foreign workers in our country who work the fields to provide us with cheap food; or the sweat shop workers in factories across the world that make our clothing and appliances. Often when I walk through Eastview Mall I think of the Hunger Games books and the lifestyles of the people of the capital district - living large off the exploitation of the people in the districts. It is as if the huddled masses of the world cry out hidden behind the fancy fronts of all those stores. Author Suzanne Collins was critiquing present day reality when she wrote those books.

So then, John the Baptist, what do you say we should do? The same advice - don't exploit our positions of power and privilege. That would mean a much lower standard of living for most of us. Assistant to the bishop the Rev. Norma Malfatti uses bananas as an example. While they normally cost us about 50 cents for a pound if every person involved in getting those bananas to us - from the growers to the harvesters to the shippers and packagers - were getting American standards of minimum wage they would cost us about \$4 a pound. Imagine if the price of everything in the store went up 800%!

The good news is that we do have that option if we want to take it. There are American garment companies - styles might be limited but it's possible. And there are things like fair trade coffee and chocolate so actually doing it isn't all that hard. Wegmans is certainly set to market to anyone who wants locally grown and fairly grown produce.

But trying to guilt you into making adjustments to your buying habits is not my intent. Let's make the situation really uncomfortable by talking about things we really want to ignore. Imagine yourself a resident of Hunt's Trailer Park - the poorest part of our area and so hidden that many people can't even find their way in.

School administrators tell me almost every student from Hunt's Trailer Park has a stigma attached to them. They're just second-rate people. Now imagine yourself as a parent with a couple elementary school kids at this time of year. Sure, you do hand-me-down clothing and shop at thrift stores to make ends meet. You know your standard of living isn't great, but it's still better than most people in the world. On one hand you don't want to exploit people halfway around the world so you can have affordable stuff, but on the other hand you just want to be able to celebrate Christmas with a nice meal and get your kids a couple decent things to wear so they aren't mocked at school. Is that such a bad thing? What should we do John the Baptist?

Last week I quoted a verse from the hymn *A Mighty Fortress*. Some of you knew where it was from. I'll be absolutely shocked if you guess this one,

"Love caused your incarnation;  
Love brought you down to me.  
Your thirst for my salvation  
Procured my liberty.  
Oh, love beyond all telling,  
That led you to embrace in love,  
All love excelling,  
Our lost and fallen race."

Since I know you won't guess this one its verse 3 of *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You* by Paul Gerhardt first published in the year 1653.

With that in mind what would John the Baptist say to the person from Hunt's Trailer Park?  
Does God love the people exploited to give you your standard of living? Did God not make them in his own image? Does God not also thirst for their salvation so much also that God died for them? Are they not full and valid Children of God too? Are you going to oppress God's good work so that you may reduce your own oppression?

No, John the Baptist wouldn't stand a chance as a presidential candidate.

I know that global politics and economics are complex and simply stop providing markets for foreign goods creates its own cascade of disasters. I'm not advocating any political or economic agenda. But I do want us to realize just how fully sin-filled and sin-trapped our lives are. I want us to recognize how deeply John's call to repentance cuts us.

We live the luxury of ignoring the real effect of our lives. Our holiday festivities will never be completely joyful as long as we incur so much baggage. Yet that is the cost of repentance. I love this quote from Walter Truett Anderson, "Our lives improve only when we take chances - and the first and most difficult risk we can take is to be honest with ourselves."

As for me, if John the Baptist does show up on the presidential ballot, he'll get my vote. Amen