

A comedian, whose name I've long since forgotten, once said, "How come everything I like is either illegal, immoral, or fattening?" Given the things that are tempting in the world, we can probably all resonate with that remark to some degree.

It's no surprise that when we read about a wild man like John the Baptist in our gospel reading that we're a bit frightened and offended by the guy. Perhaps when we hear his words of repentance for the forgiveness of sins we feel he is looking a little too closely into the desires of our hearts. Even if we don't act on them they are still ever present. Perhaps we'd like to think ourselves above such things. Or perhaps his words do strike to the core of things that we do actually do and we are ashamed of. We hear John's words to repent - which means to turn away from them completely - and we don't really want to. Maybe we enjoy some deliciously naughty things and don't want to hear that they are bad.

Or perhaps we don't like John because we think that we don't really need to repent. "Okay," we tell ourselves, "I'm

not perfect. I know that. I'm not going to get a swollen head. But really, on the whole I'm not such a bad person." And we wish John would take his words elsewhere.

I think John the Baptist is a challenging and perhaps offensive person always. He just takes us outside of our comfort zones and makes us face what we don't want to. Let's take the last thing I brought up - the idea that we are not perfect but basically good people. If you take a look at the world around us you might find good reason for feeling that way. You don't lie, you don't cheat, you don't steal. You don't do things that are violent or have destructive habits. You don't do things that could land you in jail. You may play hard ball in in business, but so does everyone else, and you never defraud anyone. You give to charities and go to church. Is this not what a good Christian person is supposed to do?

I'm afraid of what John the Baptist would say about this. I fear he would look us in the eye with his wild mangled hair and beard, with his rotten teeth from eating bugs, and the filthy dirty camel's hair rags that he wore and he would say, "Well done. You are good and faithful Pharisees. I didn't tell

you to be good. I told you to repent!" If John isn't offending you, you aren't paying close enough attention.

On Christmas day I concluded my sermon with the Christmas message from Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson. He is the man at the top of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. His words were good and affirming. Our own bishop from the Upstate New York Synod wrote a similarly nice Christmas message. But I want to read to you some excerpts from a December 21st message from Bishop Mike Rinehart from the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod. His words speak like John the Baptist.

Here's my hunch. Everything for me rises or falls on this bet. I'm putting all my eggs in this basket:

The turnaround of the mainline churches will happen when we in those churches care as much about those outside the church, as we do those inside. To embrace relevance, we will have to let go of survival.

That's it. That's all I've got. If I'm wrong, fire me now. I'll die on this hill.

What does this mean?

My theory is that the mainline churches have ceased to be relevant to the culture, because insiders trump outsiders every time.

Decisions are made for the benefit of those inside rather than those outside the church. In every single decision, even the little ones, insiders trump outsiders. Take hymns, for example. Musical decisions are not made considering what will attract spiritually

hungry outsiders, but what will please the card-carrying, bill-paying membership. Most church outsiders don't care if you ever sing "How Great Thou Art." They won't be slightly offended by a guitar in church. Time and time again church leaders receive heat from church insiders upset about this or that, because the insiders are trying to recreate their childhood church experience or simply have a rigid idea of what church is supposed to be. Church leaders cave in to these insiders because they control the purse strings.

People in power, who have privileges in the current system, will resist change and make life really hard for any leader who seeks to be a change agent. Pastors are paid from members' giving, so there is a potential conflict of interest. If they do the right thing, some leaders will end up losing their job (or up on a cross, to reference an often-told story).

What do we do about it?

Change. Adapt. The church has adapted, survived and even thrived in times of tectonic change in the past. It can again.

Let's face it, change is hard. Change, however is non-negotiable. The only constant in life is change. There is no growth without change. As someone once said, "The only one who likes change is a wet baby." Any kind of change creates conflict. Leaders can only tolerate so much discontent. And even a little discontent sounds LOUD when you're in the hot seat. So when things heat up, leaders circle the wagons, which is precisely the wrong thing to do. Instead, leaders need to sin boldly. Lead boldly. Look at any successful enterprise and you can be certain that someone, at some point, took a huge risk along the way. Nothing great is accomplished without risk.

But risk is risky, and change is simply too difficult and painful. Most organizations won't change until they're desperate, like the alcoholic that won't go to rehab until s/he hits rock bottom.

So what will give us the courage to take those risks?

This takes us back to the beginning. Churches will not adapt to the new realities until they care as much about reaching those outside, as appeasing those inside.

The world is hell-bent on destruction in countless ways. It is desperately in need of a church that offers a Way of peace, truth, compassion and hope, as opposed to the world's way of power, materialism, exploitation and violence. It needs leaders willing to risk comfort, status and economic security for the life of the world and the outreach potential of the church. It needs a church that looks less like the Pharisees' religion and more like Jesus' ministry. It needs a church that is willing to sacrifice everything for those outside: buildings, budgets, sacred cows, traditions, structures. It needs a church that so loves the world, that she'd be willing to die for it.

So here's the plan. New policy. Every decision, every single decision made by staff, council and every committee is made on behalf of those not yet here. Every sermon choice, every hymn, song and musical choice, every building and grounds choice, every spending choice is made with outsiders in mind.

When we become a church for the world, the outsider, when the pain of staying the same (and dying of irrelevance) for those already here exceeds the pain of changing (and sacrificing old ways) for those not yet here, we will be the church for which God incarnate came to this earth and gave his life.

These are not nice words. This is not the typical warm bishop's Christmas message. This is the painful truth in John the Baptist style. Fortunately as churches go St. John's is farther along than many. The fact that we aren't on the verge of closing is testimony to the fact that we've taken risks and made some gutsy changes. Some have failed, but enough have succeeded.

My point in sharing his words is this. Let's return to our gospel reading. As Jesus comes up from the water the voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well

pleased." But that is not an entirely accurate translation. Less grammatically graceful, but more literal, would be to say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; *with you I have willed the good.*"

Those are words spoken to Jesus, but they are meant for all of us. Through us - each of us - God has willed the good. This is not a goodness to be upright and proper goody-two-shoes in our culture. This is a goodness to help others. As Bishop Rinehart said,

"The world is hell-bent on destruction in countless ways. It is desperately in need of a church that offers a Way of peace, truth, compassion and hope, as opposed to the world's way of power, materialism, exploitation and violence. It needs a church that so loves the world, that she'd be willing to die for it."

Your purpose is not to live for yourself. God has made you and called you because through you God has willed the good. That's not an easy task, I know. But it is the faithful calling to which John the Baptist's words seek to prepare us. Amen