

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Luke 3:7-18

*<sup>1-6</sup> When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your life that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”*

*<sup>10</sup> The crowd asked him, “Then what are we supposed to do?”*

*“If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.”*

*<sup>12</sup> Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “Teacher, what should we do?”*

*<sup>13</sup> He told them, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.”*

*<sup>14</sup> Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”*

*He told them, “No harassment, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”*

*<sup>15</sup> The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?”*

*<sup>16-17</sup> But John intervened: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”*

*<sup>18-20</sup> There was a lot more of this—words that gave strength to the people, words that put heart in them. The Message!*

On the first two Sundays of advent season, we explored scriptures offering us material for reflection about the gifts of hope and love that God sent to the world through His only Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. These gifts can be ours as we make room for Jesus in our hearts and lives. Today on this third Sunday of Advent, we are going to explore the gift of joy that is given to us through our relationship with Christ. This gift is also given to those who make room for Jesus in their hearts. If we possess God’s gift of joy then, an important question we should ask ourselves is, “do our lives communicate joy?”

A boy was reprimanded for laughing out loud during school. “Teacher, I didn’t mean to. I was smiling, and the smile busted.” Does the joy we know in Jesus bust through our busyness and our distractions for others to see?

The scriptures that were read for us this morning, at first glance, may leave us wondering what they have to do with joy. But, I think, that as we dig deeper into them, we will uncover the message of joy.

The scripture begins with us witnessing John the Baptist in action. We find John down by the river, baptizing people. That was definitely a good thing; but the words he spoke as the crowds grew larger around him leave me questioning his tactics for leading people to repent and to be baptized.

In previous scripture texts, John is introduced to us as one who may be rather unappealing to most people. He dressed badly, ate poorly, **and now** he pretty much told-off the people listening to him with his opening welcome line. I find it rather amazing that after he

called them names, like, a bunch of poisonous snakes, that the people even stuck around to hear more of what he had to say. I have to wonder if I would have stuck around.

But they did, giving John an opportunity to explain himself. He began by questioning their reasons for coming to be baptized. He suspected that they were merely going through the motions in an attempt to keep them safe from, whatever. He confronted them with whether their intentions were genuine or were they simply being baptized because it was the thing to do at the time; and everyone was doing it.

If John was speaking to us directly, his accusations might sound something like this, We cannot get away with being a pretend Christian, or as you may have heard me say before, “we cannot simply play Christian,” and still be in unity with God. Doing our duty by going to church on Sundays, but then living throughout the week in a manner that is distant from God’s will, isn’t going to win us God’s pleasure. We can’t just go through the motions and say all of the right things and still please God.

John also accuses some of the Israelites gathered around him that day of using their family heritage as the chosen people of God as a reason that they could do no wrong in God’s eyes. I imagine that when John told them otherwise, they were none too happy with him. Hearing this, I believe John would tell us that, we cannot think that just because we belong to one denominational or non-denominational church or another is going to put us in perfect standing with God, because that is just not how it works. A relationship with God goes way beyond our association with a church; yet we argue about who’s right and who’s wrong when it comes to religious practices and Bible interpretations. This is not what God had in mind for his church.

The bottom line is that God knows our hearts. There is no way that we can hide our less-than-perfect selves from God. We cannot escape his disappointment and anger when we go-it-alone. We need God in our lives to show us the way to love one another, to live together peaceably, to serve one another. It’s too easy for selfishness to take over when we go-it-alone. John warns that those who, “Play Christian,” made that choice and are found out by God and cut off from God.

We find that some people in the crowd, like tax collectors and soldiers asked John, if baptism isn’t enough to make their lives right with God, then what should they do? I find it interesting that before they asked this, John essentially already told them what they needed to do. He told them they needed to make changes in their lives.

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3 verse 2, we read that John told the people that they needed to repent. Luke says the same thing another way, and he gave them a few more details and examples of how this works. We reflected on the topic of repentance last Sunday. We said that when we repent, we not only confess and ask for forgiveness, but also, we make changes in our lives according to the will of God, which then makes room for Jesus to move into our hearts.

When the people questioned him about the changes they needed to make in their lives; John got into the specifics of how one who is repentant lives. He told them, and he tells us to share what we have with others, especially with those who have little. We are challenged to give, to share with people we may not know and may never know.

We are given many opportunities to give to others through various ministries of the church. Donations to the Good Samaritan Fund enables us to help the poor and those who have fallen unexpectedly on hard financial times. We can give to Disaster Relief programs or go on a disaster relief work project and help those who lived in an area where a natural disaster occurred. We are given the opportunity to give through our offerings to support Micah’s backpack which feeds children who may not have food to eat over the weekends. We can donate to the collection

of school supplies for children. We can donate, not only money but also clothes and food, and our service to help to feed and reach out to people in our community through the monthly Community breakfasts and other neighborhood outreach ministries.

These are all wonderful ways through which we can help others. Adding to this, when we individually see or hear about a need, we can, and should respond with help on our own.

Secondly, John tells us not to be greedy and cheat. There are people who have always found great pleasure in cheating the system to get as much as they can for as little as possible. This angers those of us who do not take advantage of the system. But we know that greed and cheating comes in many forms.

Greedy people prey on stealing from vulnerable older adults and natural disaster victims making false promises to do something to make their lives better in exchange for what seems like a bargain price. Scammers find ways to break through the security of phones and computers; or they scare people into thinking they need to do something to correct a wrong, usually requiring the surrender of credit card or bank account information, eventually stealing one’s identity and assets.

It’s not only large-scale crooks who cheat and who are greedy. The every-day-Joe does it too. There are those who leave restaurants without paying the bill and they self-upgrade from coach to first-class airline seats. Gas stations see more than a threefold increase in the amount of money lost from people who drive away from pumps without paying, and restaurants report an increase in theft of everything from condiments, silverware to bottles of wine. Cheaters also target high-priced leisure activities.

The irony is that most cheaters could easily afford to pay for what they steal, but feel they have the right to take things in retribution for high prices or poor service. Some feel they’ve gotten the raw end of the deal in the economic boom and want to take what they can.

Cheaters usually do not think about the consequences affecting all of us when they cheat. All of the examples of cheating that I just mentioned, cause prices to go up on items so that business people can make up for their losses.

But there are other ways to cheat. There are those who cheat in relationships. They take advantage of the love, kindness, and forgiveness of friends and family. Theirs is a selfish, taking relationship, and not a genuine loving relationship. Every time someone cheats, no matter how they do it, someone else gets hurt.

Thirdly, John said we should not abuse any of the power we may have. He reminds all of us that we should gladden the hearts of others, rather than belittle them and grind them down; we ought to bless others rather than oppress others; we ought to lift up the fallen, rather than kicking them when they’re down.

Don’t withhold what you can share with those in need. Don’t be greedy and cheat others. Don’t abuse any power you may have to put down someone else. Overall, don’t contribute to another’s misery. Don’t rob others of joy. That’s a lot of don’ts.

Yes, we can look at it that way. OR we can choose to see the lesson behind these “don’ts,” which is to bring joy, to the lives of others. It should not be a problem for us to do this, especially since we live with the joy of Christ alive in our hearts. In fact, sharing joy fills us with more joy. John is trying to teach us that when we rob others of joy, we rob ourselves of joy. We distance ourselves ultimately from the joy of being one with God.

John said at the end of today’s text, God makes the final judgment, and those who defy God’s will, by being selfish, by cheating and by abusing power will suffer the ultimate consequences of God’s judgment, separation from him. Our God is a just God, we can be sure of

that. God calls us to perform deeds worthy of repentant people. We are called to look around us, to be aware of those around us, and help God by spreading God’s joy and at the same time plant seeds of faith.

What should you do? That is the question, and the God who places it as a question in your heart can also provide the answer. The Christ we serve was not simply born long ago in Bethlehem. He is present not only in the words of Scripture. Christ comes into the circumstances of each new day when we put aside preoccupation with ourselves for the sake of God and the building of God’s Kingdom. Christ comes into the circumstances of each new day, when for the love of God, we find a need and fill it, even as Christ did in deciding to come among us. Christ comes into the circumstances of our days when the joy he gives us, busts free from us so the world can see it.

Charles Spurgeon wrote this about Joy - “There is a marvelous medicinal power in joy. Most medicines are distasteful; but this, which is the best of all medicines, is sweet to the taste, and comforting to the heart. This blessed joy is very contagious. One dolorous (tearful) spirit brings a kind of plague into the house; one person who is wretched seems to stop all the birds from singing wherever he goes . . . [But] the grace of joy is contagious. Holy joy will oil the wheels of your life’s machinery. Holy joy will strengthen you for your daily labor.

Brothers and sisters, let the joy of your faith, the joy you know in Christ, be contagious, so others will want to make room for Jesus in their hearts, too. Amen.