

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Jason Fugate

December 12, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I suspect some of you are like me and do your grocery shopping on Sunday but I know we all have been grocery shopping one time or another. When you go grocery shopping, we've probably also all had this happen: you discover something you did not know you needed.

There's just something that catches your eye, not something you were seeking out but now you just have to have it. Sometimes, this can compound on itself.

I can remember a few weeks ago I walked past some delicious looking bagels at the bakery that I just HAD to have. Then, of course, I couldn't just have a bagel so I needed to go buy cream cheese. This is a familiar story right? All of a sudden, we have a whole basket of items that we had no intention of buying or any desire for until we got into the store.

We know this is not a coincidence either! Stores are set up intentionally so that we pass the "not necessary but exciting" things being sold. Shelves are stocked with a premium on where people's eye level generally is. Logos and packaging are made to draw us toward that new item and entice us to purchase it. It's intentionally drawing us away from our original grocery store plan.

While it's not too high of stakes at the grocery store, it shows just how easy it can be to get knocked off our mission. You know who we really need to come with us to avoid these distractions as a shopping buddy or a grocery store partner? John the Baptist.

John the Baptist has a clear sense of his mission and purpose. He holds it close and it drives his actions in ways that we would expect. He is always calling for those around him to be dedicated to God and as a result, how one lives their lives for God.

John the Baptist lived in a time where Roman rule was starting to have more and more control over Judea. Jewish lawmakers were experiencing more interference and expectations from Rome about their decision making. This weighed on the minds of all those making the laws, especially because Rome had such a powerful empire.

John the Baptist rejected any sort of consideration for the consequences that could come from rejecting Roman decrees or expectations. He was committed to Jewish law and felt it should be upheld whatever the cost. He had retreated to the wilderness, rejecting the ways that Galilee and other Judean areas were being governed.

That's where we pick up in our Gospel lesson. His harsh words seem almost out of nowhere until we have that background. He is committed to serving God and God's law and not giving in to Roman culture, laws, or religious practices. Many coming to John the Baptist want to be cleansed as part of

an acknowledgement of the law and proclaim themselves totally dedicated to God and not the emperor.

John's words take shape. God is more powerful than the emperor, put your trust in God and all that God will do. Live by what is important to God. This means things like sharing food and shelter. Only taking what one is owed, and don't take money from people just because you can. Care for the poor is a central tenet for John the Baptist especially as Rome was imposing harsher property taxes that would make it much harder on the poor.

What guides our lives? For John, his dedication to God would lead him into the wilderness and eventually, a politically motivated death. In that time, John spread so much good news and hope and he would baptize so many including Jesus in the Jordan.

John waited for the Messiah who would set Judea straight back on the path of the law that was uncompromising on God's reign over all things and the dedication to caring for all especially the poor. John's waiting was still an active waiting.

I would guess just based on passages like this one, John's anger got in his way sometimes. He was frustrated about waiting and the sin that he saw in the world. It motivated him in positive ways but it also caused him to say things like, "you brood of vipers!" He pined for the winnowing fork of the Messiah and the burning of the chafe. He was angry.

It brings up the question once again in my mind, “what guides our lives?” The messiah was waited on to set straight the way of Judea. It was easy to imagine a punitive military leader who enforced his rule on all those around. Christ as messiah demonstrated to us how to be in right relationship with God. Christ, throughout His ministry, did all that he could to bring people back into community where they were cast out.

For John the Baptist, he continues to reflect and angle his life toward God. His purpose is clear to him and he lives by it even in the most intense reactions and emotions. He loves God and he believes deeply in caring for the poor and lowly as well. He certainly doesn't do this perfectly but he always tries to orient himself around his faith.

The lesson from Philippians says, “do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” This task of building community is not always easy but it can come with a peace from God that passes all other understanding. This promise encourages us with hope when living out our faith is a challenge.

This can move us into a place where we don't wait with fear of judgement or overwhelming anger at the world today. We can be angry where there is evil, protest what is unjust, and dedicate our lives to a future where all of God's creation is treated with dignity and respect. This dedication comes in response to God and the salvation and love that God brings to us. All else comes and goes as we celebrate, weep, give thanks, and mourn but God's love is forever.

Abundance takes on a whole new meaning when our faith is what fills our needs. Where others may see scarcity, we can look for the abundance. All our sorrows and troubles we can turn over to God and dedicate ourselves to others because we know we are fulfilled in Christ. That radical generosity, humility, and care is what is needed today when we see so separation from one another.

Radical community, Radical neighborhood. That sounds like an extreme Mr. Rogers show or something but really, think about how you can go out of your way to live your faith in community. When we worship and pray, when we share our faith story, or when we serve others. Christ is near and assures us of the gift of grace and love. Our mission is to be with one another and praise God for all the gifts we receive each day.

John the Baptist moved out to the wilderness and baptized those as they waited for the coming messiah. That kind of faith that shakes up our lives and interrupts the process that the world simply lays out for us. What are ways that we can imagine this playing out in our own lives?

Share with someone you never would have thought too before. Sign a petition you would not have considered before. Love someone that society says is unlovable. Serve someone who has not earned it. These are just a few examples of so many ways we can radically live out our faith. Just like in when we arrive in that grocery store, we may not have realized we needed this new community until we are already there doing it. Let us pray.

Dear Lord, move us to share our faith and point our lives toward you. Both in the waiting and the doing of everyday life, we know that you are near and present. Thank you for giving us examples of faith that we can learn from. We give thanks for you sending your son Jesus Christ into the world to give us trust and hope in You and your eternal promise in our lives. Amen.