

A Great First Impression

It is, I suppose a truism that bears repeating; when we are looking to enter a new relationship, there is but one opportunity to create that great first impression.

Church researchers tell us that a guest entering a church for the first time, especially that guest who is “church shopping ” will make the “I will come back” or “I’m never coming here again” decision within about 90 seconds of sitting down. Many make that decision sooner, within 45 seconds of walking thru the door. So we as the inside folks get 45-90 seconds to make that first great impression.

What are some of the things that help make that “great first impression?” Certainly appropriate dress is important. An example from the dairy industry. Farm supplies are often marketed by salesfolk who arrive in a van or panel truck. Business casual is not impressive. The salesperson who pulls into the driveway wearing clean coveralls, immediately pulling on a pair of overboots, and who promptly washes those boots in a disinfectant solution will be well on the way to first base.

Fair or not, first impressions happen fast - very, very fast.

Matthew creates a first impression of John the Baptist and well, to a contemporary audience, John the Baptizer seems a strange fellow indeed.

Paragraph 1: John is bellowing his message. (no sound systems yet) But the first word out of the man’s mouth? *Repent!!! God’s kingdom is close at hand!!!*

Then Matthew gives his readers, some background information to build John’s credibility with first century Jewish readers: *“This John the Baptist is the one that Isaiah was speaking about hundreds of years ago, whose job it would be to prepare the way for the Messiah.”*

Paragraph 2: Matthew, like Mark before him, describes John’s attire and diet. John was working in a garment of camel’s hair with a leather belt and he munched on locusts and wild honey. When I think of John and a camel hair garment, I see an itchy coarse, smelly tunic kind of thing, not some carefully tailored camel’s hair topcoat, but of course styles have changed.

Then Matthew comments on John's audience - think big crowds of people who walked several days to get from the area around Judea and Jerusalem down to the Jordan river. 70 miles more or less.

How long would it take us to walk from here to Silver Lake? Jerusalem to the Jordan is further than that. The mountains are higher, the valley is lower, and the path was just that - a path in the wilderness. Matthew reports, *"The people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."*

Paragraph 3: Matthew puts in place the conflict that will reach its climax at the foot of the cross. *7 Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? 8 Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. 9 And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire."*

Imagine getting some folks together next weekend - say the archbishop of Hartford, the conference minister and pastors of the Connecticut Conference, all the pastors and elders of the Baptist churches, the Bishop and priests of the Episcopal diocese of Connecticut, the president of the Christian Activities council, the presidents of the Hartford Seminary and Goodwin College, together with the dean and faculty of the Law School, and the University of Hartford - Religious leaders, educated folk, keen legal minds. The Pharisees and Sadducees of our times and culture.

Imagine getting all those types of folks together in some great auditorium then saying to them, *"You snakes! Who warned you to escape judgement? Don't even think about claiming your degrees, or history or genealogy in your defense! Instead produce evidence that you have repented! Produce justice, liberty, freedom, hope, kindness and mercy as evidence you have turned your lives away from power and greed; turn your lives towards the ways of God, love, kindness, forgiveness."*

That Matthew tells us, is precisely what was happening alongside the Jordan River. Regardless of first impressions, regardless of his strange apparel, and blunt, rude speech, it was working. People were making that long journey on foot to listen to him. His message, that call to repentance was a magnet. They were hearing his

message with the ears of their hearts, so they came, repented, and sought forgiveness.

Friends, that call to repentance, that invitation to turn our eyes, hearts, and lives towards our God, is the great gift of Advent, and of that other holy penitential season, the time of Lent. If I could rearrange the lessons for the season of Advent, I would put the preaching of John the Baptist first.

I would do this because repentance is a cornerstone of faithful living in God, and in community - the community of the church, the community of the family, and every other community of human association, even unto the nation. Here I am recalling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established by the late Nelson Mandela.

True repentance is the heartfelt awareness of our failures in love of God and neighbor. True repentance the honest speaking of truth, "I did wrong and I am sorry," coupled with the forthright turning away from that wrong and the motives behind it. True repentance then means the turning toward God, and God's ways of love.

John the Baptist bellowed "*Repent. Produce the fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.*"

Today, regardless of the first impression created by John the Baptist, and remembering the words of Jesus of Nazareth who told us that the truth would set us free, I call us to the telling of our truth. In this the 2nd week of Advent, I invite us to repent. I invite us to repent and confess - not just in the words of our prayer of confession, but to confess the whole truth of our love of God, for one another, and, the whole truth of our failures of love for God and neighbor. I invite us to turn to into all the ways God would have us love with forgiveness, compassion, and a huge generosity of spirit and soul.