

Sermon for Gaudete (Advent III) – Matthew 11:2-10

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."

John the Baptizer was no country club Christian. Camel's hair is no cashmere. Locusts are no comfort food. Besides that, he was incarcerated, as "... John heard in prison the about the deeds of Christ." How did this faithful preacher end up in Judean jail?

John the Baptizer's duty was to prepare the way of the Lord. This was no easy task. Crooked roads are hard to make straight. Rough places are difficult to make into level ways. Wicked sinners are impossible to be made into good men. And so came along a group of Pharisees and Sadducees. These were men of high standing and great regard in Jerusalem. If John the Baptizer wanted to further his career, he would have welcomed these elite men like this: "Welcome to the Jordan River Church. I'm Pastor John, and I'm glad to have you here. I can see that you're very kind, loving, and zealous men and that your understanding of Scripture is surely greater than mine. Come on in and enjoy yourselves! And if you'd like to be baptized, I can help with that, too!"

But this wasn't what the Voice in the Wilderness said. How did John welcome the Pharisees and Sadducees? "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Sure, the Baptizer didn't know these Pharisees and Sadducees from Adam, but he knew that the old Adam was alive and well in each one of them. John cared for these men's souls and would do anything so that they would die to sin and be made alive in Christ Jesus. He was hell-bent on drowning their Old Adam that the new man should arise and live before God in righteousness and purity forever. John the Baptizer cared.

But it didn't end there. It was public knowledge that King Herod the tetrarch lived in adultery with his brother's wife Herodias. John the Baptizer could have been quiet like everyone else. He could have gone about his way, minding his own business. But that would have been his way and not God's way. John's words: "It is not lawful for you to have her." After that, the Baptizer was seized, bound, put in prison, and finally beheaded. You see, He

cared for his king so much that he lost everything. John knew Herod was in danger so he loved him to death. And even though his head was severed from his body, his message was clearer than ever: Herod, you stand condemned by your adulterous life, but One had come who will even die for that sin. Because John the Baptizer knew of the Lord that had come, the strap of whose sandal he was not worthy to untie. He knew that the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world would take away his sins and the sins of all men even unto death. John knew Jesus. And so John cared.

Do you care? Do you love your neighbor like John the Baptizer? John cared for those he didn't even know; he put in all on the line: job, reputation, and even his life. But you? Do you think too highly of yourself? Do you put your relationships and good reputation above God's Word and Holy worship? Would rather have your neighbor suffer eternally than for him to think any less of you? Your kind words, your warm personality, your closing your eyes to the sins right in front of you are paving a fine road to hell for your neighbors trapped in the devil's snares. But what do you care? At least you're on good terms with them. At least there's no fighting in the family. And the fact that your loved ones are wrapped up in sin, well, you can let someone else tell them that.

Dearly Beloved, I'm not exhorting you to be so zealous for the Law and Ten Commandments to find favor with God. You're not better or holier than anyone else; you're a poor miserable sinner. Nor am I insisting that you find satisfaction in keeping every law in the Book as an end in itself. Your motivation is not perfection in every doctrine of God's Word, but to love every man. Yet know that every doctrine of God's Word is for man's good. This is true love for the neighbor.

Your love for the neighbor is grounded in the Savior who loves you. He loves you and all your neighbors and family. He still makes those blinded by sin to see. He still makes those paralyzed by guilt to walk. He still cleanses leprous sinners by His Body and Blood in the sacrament of the altar. He still makes those deaf because of their transgressions to hear. He still raises those dead in their trespasses through Holy Baptism and Holy Absolution. And even your poor and repentant heart still has the Good News preached to it. He did it all for you. He still does it for you.

So you, O sinner, even when you are ashamed of God and His Word, even when you are offended by Him, Christ is never offended by you. He will never fail to call you His own. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠