

The Inclusive Community

Second Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2009

Homily of Terry and Fred Quinn

Luke 3: 1-5 Philippians 1: 3-11

Theme: Prepare the Way

When we think of John the Baptist, we think of the one who, like those who dig and level a road, prepare it for the pavers so that it will be clear for the travelers on the way. However, John was not just a “preparer.” He was, like Jesus, a member of a two-class society. There was a very small group at the very top, almost no middle class, with the vast majority of the people at the bottom. The distinction was both political and economic-- with about 90 % in the lower or peasant classes made up of agricultural workers, day laborers, manual laborers, construction workers, artisans, miners and low-ranking servants, while the rest included the elites and their retainers who were religious, military or government officials. This last group made up the domination system of the time.

Needless to say, both John and Jesus were members of the peasant class and had experienced the day to day life of the poor. They were also men whose awareness of the Spirit was always active within them. While we know little of Jesus’ upbringing in Nazareth and nothing of John’s early life, we do know that Jesus probably spent the years after the age of 10 as an apprentice journeyman to his father Joseph, and that during his family’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem exhibited a deep sense of the sacred, even at an early age. Biblical scholars also tell us that, reaching for more spiritual depth, sometime in his mid to late twenties, Jesus went into the wilderness to seek out the prophet John. John was an important figure in first century Judaism. In fact, Josephus, the historian, wrote more about John than he did Jesus. John had no official standing, yet he was well known—a man who dressed like Elijah the great prophet and ate locusts and honey, known for his introspection and spirituality. John would have been good fodder for the paparazzi of today because he was also an anti-establishment figure who preached repentance and baptism of water bypassing

the Temple. Keep in mind that the Temple claimed to be the only mediator of forgiveness. John was an anti-Temple prophet. As George reminded us last week in the vernacular of today---“the words of the prophet are written on the subway walls, tenement halls----and Jesus sought out the movement of protest and renewal preached by John. We don’t know how long a time Jesus spent with John—some speculate a few years---but John became his mentor, his teacher, his spiritual confidant. Matthew and Luke both have Jesus saying, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.”

It was during his time with John that Jesus intensely experienced the Spirit of God. Mark reports that Jesus made a striking impression as a teacher and that he taught with authority. The Jewish term for authority is Gevurah which literally means from the mouth of the spirit.” We can only imagine what the interplay and connection between John and Jesus was like. On the one hand you have John, the ascetic, the loner and thinker who doesn’t venture from the desert—a product of his Essene, austere background. On the other hand you have Jesus, essentially a “people person” who ventured forth with a band of followers culled from the peasant class, including women and even his mother, who ate with and embraced all, even Gentiles and so-called sinners. Jesus, inspired by his time with John and filled with his own inner spiritual energy, began his public life. We might say that he went out to change the world, reminding us of the Ghandian statement----“Be the change you want to see in the world.” Knowing that the Kingdom of God, that the Spirit was within him, he, with his years with John behind him, nurturing his spirit, went out to teach others about that spiritual Kingdom. In contemporary society, there are so many ways we see evidence of the spirit.

Where?—well, we think that it was with the members of the Inclusive Community and children from Newark when they went to Washington D.C. for the Aids Quilt display and candlelight service, where they saw their own quilt among so many others to honor and seek help for those afflicted with Aids. We think that it would be supporting and visiting the Gay Men’s Health Crisis as our son has done. We think it would be volunteering at the free health clinics and working at the shelters especially in the barrios of the cities. Just as he did along the paths that he walked Jesus and the Spirit within him and within all of us speaks for peace, for tolerance, for forgiveness, for compassion, for love now. Every time we inspire or connect, we too become preparers and purveyors of the spirit.

We have some stories about some famous, and not so famous people who learned from the spirit of others or were inspired to connect with someone in the sharing of the spirit. The first is the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, who in 1959 visited India. He said, "It was wonderful to be in Gandhi's land. Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of non-violent social change." We know how he, the student, inspired by the words and actions of Gandhi was able to put into practice his principles in a different country but with similar social barriers. Lives were changed, laws were changed-- influencing others to follow in the same spirit. Indeed the force of that spirit was so strong that it still changes lives and ways of thinking today.

About 20 years ago, while teaching first grade in Rahway, a child was placed into my class who had just arrived from India. She spoke no English and was very shy. I then realized that she needed to learn English and at that time we had very little ESL help. Her family was running a rundown hotel at the corner of Route 1-9 a few blocks from our house. I communicated to her father that I would come once or twice a week to tutor both Asmita and her brother who was in 4th grade. She was very intelligent, great in math (the universal language) and both she and her brother began to learn quickly. After several months, we stopped the tutoring since they were learning well enough by then. I had not asked for payment, but at that last visit, Asmita's father paid me \$80. I didn't want to take it, but when I tried not to take it, I realized that it was important to him that I do. It was a matter of honor. To tell the truth I had always been a little afraid when I went there, because it was not the greatest place. We all learned from the experience. The children became excellent students and there was an understanding among us that acceptance and a respect for others were innately valued by all of us.

We have one last story about the value of kindred spirits and the fruit of that connection. When Abe Lincoln was eight years old, his father moved the family to Indiana. Before he could finish the building of a cabin, Abe's mother became ill and died. After about a year, Abe's father couldn't stand the sadness any longer. So, he went to Kentucky leaving the children with a cousin. Abe and his sister waited in trepidation. What if his father didn't return? But he did return with his new stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, along with her own children, two girls and a boy. She was warm and friendly and smiled a lot. Abe appreciated that she didn't seem to notice that he was too tall or mind that he was homely. From that time on until the end of his life Abe felt that she was the best friend he had."

Sarah did all the motherly things both Abe and his sister craved—keeping the cabin clean, and cooking them good meals and sharing her love with them. She also shared her books, like the Bible and Aesop's Fables.

"Can you read?" his stepmother asked. Abe shook his head. "Nor can I" she added softly. "But I'll make sure that you'll get the chance, soon as more settlers move in and start a school up." The winter when Abe was thirteen a school was started. All the children went for a few months. Thanks to his cousin Dennis, who made him a pen of a wild turkey feather, bought him paper and ink, Abe constantly practiced writing. He made a note book and wrote in it. At the age of fourteen Abraham Lincoln had learned to write. The rest is history.

Just as the time spent with John became so much a part of who Jesus was, just as that universal connective spirit worked in them in different ways, so the spirit works in us during this season of Advent and always. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "May your love for each other increase and may you deepen your perception so that you may always recognize what is inspired."