

May I Say Who's Calling?

December 8, 2013

Matthew 3:1-12

There aren't too many things that really bug me. But I want to confess to you this morning that one thing I really have a problem with is call screeners. You know, the people who serve as shields or gatekeepers for "important" or "busy" people.

You call and ask for someone and they say something like, "may I tell him who's calling?" or sometimes just "who's calling?" And it's not just business calls – I've had that happen when calling a residence.

I don't know – maybe it shouldn't trouble me, and I guess I understand it in a way. I know people have things to do, and not every call is really important.

But that sort of thing has always conveyed an attitude of, "I need to know who you are so I can decide if you are worth my valuable time" or something like that, which is probably not a real Christ-like attitude.

But certainly not all calls have to deal with that sort of thing. The phone rings. You pick it up and say "Hello" and on the other end of the line, you hear somebody say, "Hey! How are you doing?"

Instantly you know exactly who it is and you begin chatting away the time. How did you know who it was? You recognized their voice!

There are certain people whose voice we know so well that as soon as we hear their voice on the phone, hear their voice cheering on the team, or even hear their voice in a crowded room we know exactly who it is because we recognize their voice.

But in order for us to get to the point where we can recognize someone simply by hearing their voice at least one of two things needs to occur. Either there needs to be something unique about their voice or we need to be very familiar with that person.

Today, as we continue to prepare our hearts and our lives during this Advent season, we once again come into contact with the voice of someone who is uniquely associated with this particular season of the year. That individual's name is John, called the Baptist, or the Baptizer.

Let's look at the familiar words of Matthew's third chapter and hear again the Advent voice of John: Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near, and think about what repentance really means.

John the Baptist is perhaps one of the best-known characters in Bible history. We know him as the babe who leaped in his mother's womb when Mary came to visit.

We know him as the forerunner of Christ whom God set aside to prepare the way for Jesus' coming.

But most of all we remember John because of that message he preached in the desert of Judea. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

If ever there were a message and a messenger clearly identifiable with each other, it is John the Baptist and the call to repentance.

There were, of course, a number of things that set John apart from the other religious leaders of his day and age. Scripture describes him as, a man whose "clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist.

His food was locusts and wild honey." But the voice of John ringing out in the desert, calling people to repent of their sins is by far the most striking.

John's title was the Baptizer but first and foremost he was a prophet of God. And as a prophet he came to God's people proclaiming God's word. Telling the people to prepare for the advent of the messiah. His message – Repent!

The message to repent had become a familiar theme for God's people. Throughout their history the children of Israel had led lives that required God to send one of his prophets to call his people to repentance.

In the days of the Judges, the people would sin against God. God would call the people to repentance by allowing them to be oppressed and when they cried out to him for deliverance, he would send a deliverer to rescue them.

At this time in salvation history God was calling his people to repentance again! They had fallen away from God again!

Their worship life had become one of half-hearted devotion - performing the required sacrifices, saying the right things, and giving the outward appearance that they were righteous and upright.

They were trusting in their ability to keep God's commandments and in their good works to enter the kingdom of heaven. Their hearts and minds were far from God, so God sent John to call the people to repent of these sins. And the people responded.

The Scriptures tells us, "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."

John's call from God to the people of his day is also God's call to us today. I think if we will be honest, we will all realize that there are things that separate us from God and the relationship we need to have with God. We need to repent.

In the Bible the word, "repent" very literally means, "To change one's mind." Genuine repentance involves a change of mind. It involves a change of heart. It involves a complete change of direction in our lives.

But even as we recognize our need for this, we must realize that we cannot effect these change in ourselves and on our own.

True genuine repentance is something that must be worked in us by the power of God. Only the Holy Spirit is able to effect this kind of change in our hearts, minds and lives.

In John's day, the people had been brought to recognize the seriousness of their sins through the preaching of God's holy Law, and through the power of the Holy Spirit they had been led to confess their sins. These individuals were baptized "with water for repentance."

Now, was it the act of being baptized that saved these people and made them right with God?

A Presbyterian perspective stresses the need for baptism as a key part of salvation and the life of faith, but also stresses the need for personal faith as the crucial ingredient for the sacrament of baptism to have effect. Participation in the sacrament alone is no guarantee of salvation. We are saved solely by our personal faith in Jesus Christ.

But Baptism is a sign for the world to see, indicating we belong to Christ, are identified with him and are committed to live as Christ's followers and disciples.

I'll have more to say about Christian baptism next month when we observe the Sunday known as the Baptism of the Lord.

So in John's day, even though Christ had not yet come and God's redemptive plan had not been fully revealed, the Holy Spirit led people to John as he proclaimed the word of God, and their baptism was an outward sign that they were turning from sin – that they were repenting.

This was really the beginning of the unfolding of God's plan of redemption. John was truly preparing the way for the Messiah.

As we celebrate the Advent season, we praise God for two things. First, for Jesus' first Advent. We are reminded that God has indeed blessed us by sending Jesus the Christ to this world to save us from our sins.

Secondly, we are reminded to listen to the Advent voice of John as he reminds of Jesus Second Advent when he comes as judge for each of us. We talked about that last Sunday.

As we wait for Jesus to return John the Baptist tells us to repent of our sins because the kingdom of God is near. But John also tells us that after we repent our acts and actions are to be in keeping with repentance.

Many people had come to John, repented of their sins and were baptized to assure them their sins were forgiven. But not all who came to John were truly repentant.

A very good example of this is found here in our text when we read, "But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them:

'You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. "

Don't just say to each other, 'we're safe, for we are descendents of Abraham."

The Pharisees and Sadducees, people who were proud of their own self-righteousness, people who were proud of their own skepticism, came to John.

Like many people today neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees recognized the seriousness of their sin. They did not recognize their need for a Savior from sin.

They did not recognize the necessity of changing their outward lives to show that they had truly repented.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees did, however, put a great deal of confidence in the fact that they had the blood of Abraham coursing through their veins.

So in a very powerful, unmistakable way John the Baptist reminded them that their ancestry, their lineage, who they were, did not make a bit of difference when it came to being right with God.

Today John might rephrase what he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees by saying something like, "Don't think that just because your name is on the membership roster of a Christian congregation that God has to let you into His heaven!

What you think and what you say and what you do outside the confines of this building is perhaps a far more accurate gauge of what is or is not in your heart."

Since the term repentance is somewhat misunderstood by many people today, people both inside and outside of the church, I would like to offer some thoughts about what John meant when he said that after we repent our acts and actions are to be in keeping with repentance.

First, we need to understand that John's call was not a call to people to earn the forgiveness of sins. Christ-like behavior is a result of forgiveness and not a cause of forgiveness. It is something we do without any legal compulsion.

That is why we find that Scripture does not set up a code book that specifies the exact form which repentance must take in the case of every sin.

While at times we might wish that the Bible would say, "If you commit this sin then do this penance and then God will be satisfied," it simply does not work that way.

The Bible is not to be used as a codebook of Canon Law. Scripture does, however, give us three broad principles when it comes to the evidence of repentance in our lives.

Principle Number One: Repentance is to turn away from the sin you are repenting of.

In Luke's account of this very same incident, we are told that people were coming up to John the Baptist and asking, "What should we do?"

To the crowd in general John said, "Share with those in need." Instead of being greedy, instead of simply accumulating things for ourselves, share with those in need.

To the tax collectors that were despised for collecting more taxes than the Romans required John simply said, "Don't collect any more than you are required to."

And to the soldiers who were notorious for abusing their power and authority and for extorting money from the people John very simply said, "Be content with your pay."

Now I don't believe any of us are tax collectors or soldiers, so those specific words obviously don't apply to us.

But, for example, if our sin consists of allowing our conversations to be sprinkled with hurtful, harmful or inappropriate words then repentance would include cleaning up our language.

If our sin were one of neglecting God's holy Word and Sacrament by a lack of regular attendance at worship or Bible study, guess what repentance would be?

Have we harbored a dislike for someone in our heart? The fruit of repentance is to turn away from the sin you are repenting of.

Principle Number Two: The fruit of repentance is to restore, if possible, what sin has ruined.

Remember we talked about Zacchaeus a few weeks ago. When Zacchaeus came down from the sycamore-fig tree he voluntarily said to Jesus, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount"

It is true that sometimes a sin results in irreparable damage. A drunk driver runs a red light and kills innocent people. Hateful gossip damages someone's reputation.

But if there is a way, any way, to even partially restore what our sin has ruined the fruit of repentance will lead us to do just that.

Principle Number Three: The fruit of repentance is to do everything to the glory of God, whether we eat or drink, or work or play.

Since the root of all sin is idolatry, striving to take the glory and the honor and the praise which rightfully belongs to God alone and giving it to someone or something else, often ourselves, the fruit of repentance will include re-focusing our heart, re-focusing our mind and re-focusing our life so that in everything we think do and say we strive to bring glory to the God who loves us enough that He died on the cross to completely pay for all of our sins.

Jesus often used the picture of fruit to describe the life of his followers. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit;"

Like the fruit on the branch which needs to remain connected to the vine so that it can grow and blossom, so also do we need to remain connected to our source, our Lord, so that we can produce fruit.

God, because of his great love for us, has grafted us into his vine so that we can produce fruit and he nourishes us with his Word and Sacraments.

In his Word he tells us how he sent Jesus into this world to be our substitute. He tells us how he punished Jesus for our sins instead of us. He tells us that Jesus gave up his life for you and me and now we have peace with God.

Sometimes we pick up the phone and an unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line will start with some cheery spiel – how are you today; or "may I please speak with J a y Oh L a m b e t h – or something like that.

And we think, "Oh, no. Here we go again." We don't want to talk to that person. We don't even want to listen to them because they are usually trying to sell us something we either don't need or don't want.

But the call that rings in our ears today, my friends, is a call that we all need to hear. It is the voice of John the Baptist calling out to us to repent of our sins, to prepare our hearts and to prepare our lives so that we are indeed ready to again meet our King.

May God graciously grant that we will indeed listen, truly listen to the Advent voice of John. Amen.