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**Gaudete / The Third Sunday in Advent**

Text: St. Matthew 11:2-11

In the Name of the Father, and of the @ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I would have to say that I seriously doubt that Saint John the Baptist would be a much sought-after pastor and preacher today. Today, it seems that many, if not most people, believe, and this even in the Christian Church, that tolerance is more loving than truth, and I sincerely doubt that St. John would ever have been called tolerant. In our typical 21st century rush to label everything and everyone that rubs us the wrong way, or with whom we disagree, I think that it is a pretty safe bet that John the Baptist’s pastoral theology would today, be labeled as *“extreme”* or *“intolerant”* or at best, *“self-righteous,”* and His passion for His God and the Word of God, as an angry personality defect in serious need of professional counseling, which unfortunately John did receive at the business end of an ax.

No, John’s preaching was anything but tolerant. In fact, his style of preaching might often be described today as the *“hell-fire and brimstone”* kind of preaching. Hold nothing back, tell it like it is, and if people do not like it, well then, let them build a bridge and get over it. That was how St. John preached.

John was uncompromising in his doctrine and practice, just as he was uncompromising in his message. Thus, St. John’s preaching and teaching were not cute, whimsical, or entertaining. His words cut deeper than any two-edged sword, *“piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow…”* John was certainly not cuddly, and I doubt he ever heard the old adage, *“you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.”* Nor, do I imagine, would he have cared.

John’s call by God was not about catching flies; it was about preaching and teaching God’s Word. It was about preparing the way of the Lord; making straight in the desert a highway for our God, that every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places made straight and the rough places smooth.

I also imagine that John had no trouble sleeping at night. At the end of every day, he closed his eyes with a clear conscience. He had done what he was called by God to do and what every pastor before or since has been called to do—to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins by faith in Jesus Christ; to preach the truth in and out of season without regard to his personal popularity or public opinion.

This would make St. John the Baptist, who was the greatest of the prophets and the greatest *“among those born of women,”* to be in complete harmony with St. Paul, the Apostle of Christ Jesus to the gentiles, and from whom you heard even this very day, *“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.”*

Both John and Paul rested on the judgment of God, not the judgment of men, be they common men, or even priests or kings. There was only one Authority to whom they answered—only one authority they cared to please—Almighty God and Almighty God alone.

But, of course, today, a pastor is, more often than not, expected to be a people-pleaser, to set aside the works of Christ in favor of the works and whims of men. Today, a pastor is not expected to be a servant who answers solely to God, but a kind of CEO who answers to a human board of directors. Too often, a pastor’s success is not measured by the fulfilling of his ordination vows to preach the Word of God in all its fullness and purity, and to administer the Holy Sacraments according to Christ’s institution, but rather how well he pleases the people, how many people there are who fill the pews, and how much money is collected in the offering on any given Sunday. His steadfastness in visiting the sick and comforting the dying and the bereaved seem very often to be superfluous in any evaluation of his faithfulness to Christ and the Church.

Yet, if that is the case, then even Jesus would fail the test, that is, if you believe in the Jesus of Holy Scripture and not some ersatz version made up by Hollywood, false prophets, or your own sinful mind. For Jesus, too, was single-minded in His pursuit of your salvation no matter the cost. His greatest concern was to please His Father in heaven, who, in turn, was only concerned with saving you.

Thus, contrary to what seems to be popular belief, when Jesus walked this earth, His greatest purpose was not to please you, it was to save you. It was for this purpose, and this purpose alone, that our Lord took on human flesh, lived a life of poverty, was rejected by His own people and the established religious authorities, was beaten nearly to death, and finally, died on a cross for your sins.

Just as when He walked among us, many today are scandalized and offended by Jesus, so they desire to make Jesus something He is not. They find His preaching too stringent and His teaching inflexible. They would rather that He be a cuddly Jesus. They do not want a just Jesus; they want a lovey-dovey Jesus, a tolerant Jesus. The Jesus they prefer is more in line with Santa Claus with his rosy cheeks and flowing white beard or the Easter Bunny with his cottontail. They would rather have an obese elf that gives nothing worse than sticks and coal when they are naughty than a just and righteous God who deals in heaven and hell. Such a God is just too absolute, too judgmental. No, they would prefer a Jesus who is morally neutral, a milquetoast Jesus. But this is not the Jesus of Holy Scripture, and this is definitely not the Jesus St. John preached, nor is this the Jesus pastors today are given to preach.

But who is the Jesus that St. John the Baptist and your pastor were ordained to preach? We are given to preach the Words of eternal life in order that the: *“blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.”* We are commanded to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the life of the world; blessed is he who is not offended because we preach and teach nothing more and nothing less.

Pastors today, like John the Baptist, are to prepare the way for Jesus. They are to fill in the valleys, bring low the mountains, make straight the crooked, and make smooth the rough places. They are to point the way to Jesus who heals the brokenness of our souls.

Thus, our Lord still has His messengers, called and ordained, to prepare the faithful for a blessed celebration of His first advent, for His constant advent in His Word and Sacrament with which He strengthens us for our earthly journey and prepares us for His final advent when He will come again in glory to judge both the living and dead. They are to prepare the way of the Lord in the hearts and minds of men.

That is the preaching every Christian pastor is called upon to preach. God works through His called and ordained preachers to bring to light things hidden in the darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts of men, in order to bring them to repentance and salvation—to give them that true and lasting peace, which the world cannot give.

So, St. John the Baptist is the icon of every faithful pastor. Like John, our Lord Jesus uses them to prepare His way. They are His messengers, who preach nothing more than His Law to rend our hearts that we would recognize our need for a Savior, and His Gospel, to mend our hearts, to show us that Jesus *is* our Savior. And then, they give us that very same Savior in the bloody waters of Holy Baptism, in the Supper of His crucified and resurrected Flesh and Blood, and in the blessed gift of His holy and gracious Absolution.

Therefore, pastors are to preach Jesus—the Jesus who comes *“for us men and for our salvation.”* They are to preach the Jesus who comes to suffer and die and take His life up again for you. They are to tell you that Jesus comes to help and comfort you in all things and that this He does by washing you in His bloody Baptism, and by giving to you the Medicine of Immortality in His Body and Blood, in and with bread and wine, to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of your sins.

Blessed are those, then, who are not offended because of Jesus. Blessed are those who do not demand more, who are not disappointed, who do not say, *“That’s all fine and good pastor, but this is what I believe.”* For Jesus gives you the best of Himself. In fact, He gives you Himself totally, even His own life, fully and completely. It is my fervent prayer that you receive Him, not as you *think* He should come, not as you *believe* He should be, but as He truly is. And may you welcome and rejoice in the salvation He gives you here in this place, in His Divine Service, and wherever you might hear His holy Word spoken in all its power, purity, and truth, and wherever they celebrate His Holy Sacraments rightly administered. For then you are among the blessed who truly hear His Word and keep it.

That is what you came to church to see. Not a reed swaying in the wind. This is what Jesus proclaims to the disciples of St. John the Baptist, just as John proclaimed it to the multitudes. For John was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and what our Lord gave Him to say is exactly what He gives to all preachers to preach—that Jesusforgives you all your sins.

In the Name of the Father, and of the @ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Rev. Raymond D. Parent II

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