

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Sunday, December 13, 2015
Rejoice!

Those of you who have shared with me this year in working on financial matters of this church know that I have a bit of a tendency toward focusing on details. I am a detailed person. I may at times be guilty of missing the forest while looking at the trees. Today, I am not truly offering a confession and an offer to repent of my ways, because I am actually fond of my detailed nature and sometimes feel as though I discover important items that others may have missed.

Thus, it may surprise you that I have anxiety and - maybe even a bit of a phobia - over the completion of my personal income tax forms. My phobia has to do with the fear of making a mistake, being audited, and even having to go to jail for what I would consider an honest mistake. I actually would read my income tax booklet page by page to make sure I did not miss some deduction I was entitled to or did not fail to pay some required obscure tax.

These thoughts about taxes and finances came into my mind today when I read the prescription from John the Baptist to the tax collectors: "*Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.*" (Luke 3: 13) John is addressing far greater issues than any detailed tax mistake I have ever made, but I share my story as an example of how John calls his audience to examine their behaviors and actions rather than only being concerned with their thoughts and beliefs. John was also demanding far more from his audience, and is demanding far more from us today, that simply an accurate accounting of our finances.

In our text, John the Baptist makes not only the demand for tax collectors to "*Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you*" (Luke 3: 13), he makes two more very specific demands - each in response to the question, "*What then should we do?*" (Luke 3: 10) To the crowds, his demand is: "*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*"(Luke 3:11) To the soldiers, his demand is: "*Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.*" (Luke 3: 14)

What then would John the Baptist say to us if we asked, "What then should we do?" What actions are we guilty of today that calls for repentance? Do we in America have more coats than we need and more food than we need? Has our country and our corporations been guilty of extorting money by threats and false accusation? Have the majority of Americans ever learned to be satisfied with our wages rather than contributing to the great injustice of the vast disparity between rich and poor?

Yes, I acknowledge and am grateful for the ways that this church does what it can for those less fortunate than ourselves: the mitten tree that is outside the sanctuary in the narthex today; the gifts we collect for VEAP, the long history of serving food through Loaves and Fishes; our participation in Meals on Wheels, the BOCE led outreach efforts such as last

Monday when we served food to families at Parkway United Church of Christ in support of the program “Families Moving Forward”; yesterday’s outing to Victory 44 in North Minneapolis; our monthly loose change offerings; our contributions to the Daylight School in Kenya; our OCWM gift and special offerings to the United Church of Christ; and possibly many others I have missed in my list or that each individual member of this church may contribute to with time, talent and treasure. I celebrate these outreach ministries and pray that they may continue and expand.

However, I also believe that John the Baptist is demanding more from us. Biblical commentator, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, says this about John’s message: *“The preacher from the desert addressed the crowd, tax collectors, and soldiers, with an uncompromising demand for fairness and justice...For the Baptist, repentance had everything to do with how one handled riches, executed public service, and exercised stewardship.”*¹ How might we more fully embrace this call to repentance with an uncompromising demand for fairness and justice?

I profess that the Christian church today, and unfortunately for much of its history, is called to repentance. Called to repentance for having lost sight of this message of “an uncompromised demand for fairness and justice”. When Constantine decreed Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire, the Christian church lost sight of this uncompromised demand for fairness and justice for those who did not hold correct beliefs. In Germany, the Christian church lost sight of this uncompromised demand for fairness and justice for the Jewish people that resulted in the horror of the Holocaust. The Christian church lost sight of this uncompromised demand for fairness and justice when it supported slavery in America and continues today to deny the role racism plays in denying rights to people of color. The Christian church lost sight of this uncompromised demand for fairness and justice when it decreed that women were not qualified to serve in the priesthood or the multitude of other ways – including the use of non-inclusive language – in which the church sends the message to women that they are not worthy of the same rights and privileges as men. The Christian church lost sight of this message when it fought to deny civil rights of marriage to persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

I recognize that there are differences in our country and in this faith community about specific actions that might be required to address current issues of injustice. There are also differences in opinion over the manner in which I have just framed my perspective on particular issues of justice. I share my perspective and I encourage everyone to share your perspectives with me and with one another whether in agreement or disagreement with mine. I believe that addressing these issues and these differences of perspectives is critical as this faith community continues to live into our vision and mission and as we seek to shape a revitalized future.

In today’s text from the letter of Paul to the Philippians, we hear a different perspective from John the Baptist’s call for repentance. Paul calls us to Rejoice! Paul says, *“Rejoice in the*

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

Savior always; again I will say, Rejoice.” How do we spend time and energy rejoicing, when we are feeling overwhelmed in our lives with preparations for Christmas; or overwhelmed with health concerns for ourselves or people we love; or overwhelmed with grief; or overwhelmed with competing demands for our time and energy from family, work, volunteer engagements and even from the stewardship demands of this faith community; or even overwhelmed with despair over the injustices that we see in the world?

It may be helpful for us to remember that Paul wrote his words: *“Rejoice in the Savior always; again I will say, Rejoice.”* (Philippians 4:4) while he was in prison. His personal circumstances were far worse than any of us worshipping here today. Yet Paul said, *“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Savior is near.”* (Philippians 4:5) Commentator Edward Pillar offers this reflection on “gentleness”: *“Gentleness doesn’t always go down well in our culture. To live in gentleness is to provide a stark contrast to the harsh, acrimonious, and sometimes cruel values that are the norms of the ethos of our culture. The character of Christ is our prime example of gentleness, and his gentleness was often met with hatred and violence. But Paul seeks to encourage the disciples to hold on to the character of Christ...”*² Biblical scholars also say that the word gentleness can be translated as “forbearance”. May we, in this faith community hold onto our gentleness and our forbearance as we – in the words of our Vision Statement – “joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ's example.

Paul also was facing the awareness that many of the people from his beloved faith community in Philippi were questioning their willingness to stay on the Jesus path. Those early Christians believed that Jesus’ return was imminent and were growing weary. To those early Christians and to us today, Paul offers these words of encouragement: *“..but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:6b-7)

May these words of Paul help us to understand that the demand to “Rejoice!” is not yet another demand on our time and our energy. As I said to the children this morning, if we have joy in our hearts, if we have the love of Jesus in our hearts, then that joy and love of Jesus stays in our hearts, no matter the circumstances of our lives. We do not experience joy based on what happens to us, we experience joy because God loves us. May each of us know, more fully, the joy that comes from being loved by God. Amen.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2696