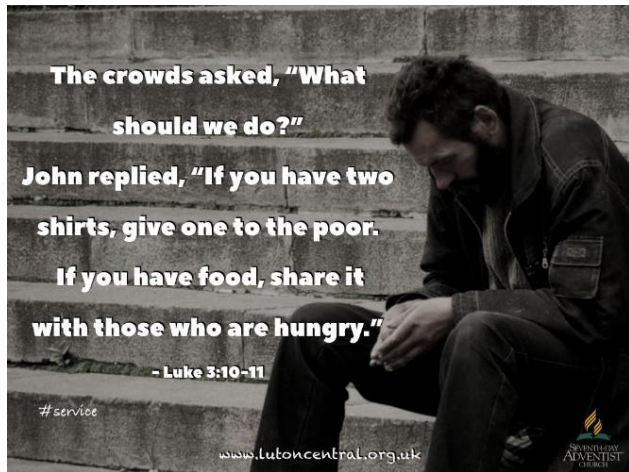


Homily – December 15th, Third Sunday of Advent



Last weekend, you may recall, we had John the Baptist telling us to prepare the way of the Lord. He told us—in broad, general terms—to make the Lord’s path straight, fill in the valleys, and flatten the mountains. The scriptures are often deliberately left

open-ended like that, encouraging us to determine concretely what filling in the valleys and flattening the mountains actually means in our particular lives and in the life of the world. This time, however, John the Baptist, gives concrete examples of what that might mean. Three times John the Baptist is asked, **“What should we do?”** It reminds me of the silicone wristbands some Christians wear with the acronym W.W.J.D. (What Would Jesus Do?), not a bad question to ask. It presupposes that if we could figure out what Jesus would do in this concrete situation, then, as followers of Christ, we should try to do the same. After all, Jesus never once asked us to worship him, only to follow him. Worshipping is always easier than following, as worshipping asks very little of us.

I am reminded of a saying that Fr. Richard Rohr uses. It goes like this: **We do not think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking.** Unfortunately, most of us—including myself—don’t ascribe to that. What I tend to ascribe to is, “Look before you leap.” In other words, think carefully about what you are about to do before you do it. John the Baptist’s advice and

Richard Rohr's recommendation of living yourself into a new way of thinking is more akin to Nike's motto: Just Do It. It's a call to action.

I've spent most of my life living a more cautionary existence. Caution has served me well, by and large, but is not the best way to move forward if I want to grow spiritually. If following Jesus and trying to do God's will is as important as I believe it is, then it is becoming more obvious to me as I get older, that I ought to imitate God who has thrown all caution to the wind by giving us his only begotten Son. God did not withhold his only begotten Son, and Jesus freely laid down his life. We save for a rainy day, while Jesus gives us the whole enchilada, and reminds us that "today is the day of salvation." What's wrong with thinking ourselves into a new way of living? We almost always talk ourselves out of it. It's too hard to imagine it until we do it. My mind alone has too many objections, too many conflicted agendas to Jesus' command to "love your enemy." On the level of the mind, I can't do it. These people are my enemies for very good reasons, I've convinced myself. They don't deserve my love or anybody else's love.

Perhaps it's a rewiring that needs to happen in us, if we are to follow Jesus more faithfully. After all, he tells us to throw out the old wineskins because they just won't accommodate the new wine he wants to give us.

Rewiring might be the best metaphor to use. Back in 1983, when I was graduating from high school, I was thinking about my future and what I wanted to do with my life. At the top of the list was the notion that I might like to become a physiotherapist. When I mentioned it to my high school biology teacher, she

proceeded immediately to book me a time at one of Ottawa's hospitals for me to visit the physiotherapy ward. Her friend was a physiotherapist and was going to give me a look-and-see tour. Part of the tour involved seeing a young man with his entire right arm submerged in a large vat of warm, melted wax. The wax was to form a warm seal around his damaged arm and help with the healing. On the side, she then told me that he was in a terrible accident while he was riding his motorcycle and that he would have a long recovery. This physiotherapist also told me that part of the problem was that this young man's brain was no longer sending the normal signals from his brain to his arm. Therefore, he couldn't move his arm. What was needed, she said, was a rewiring. They were going to do things in reverse. They were going to move, exercise and stimulate his arm everyday in the hopes that the neurological signal would actually move from his arm back to his brain.

It was going to be the spiritual equivalent of not thinking ourselves into a new way of living but of living ourselves into a new way of thinking. Sometimes you just have to give yourself permission to do something outside the box—rather than fearing what's outside the box—and a new way of thinking, a more life-giving, a more freeing way of thinking emerges. And when it emerges, you never want to go back to the old way of thinking. "When we can live ourselves into a new way of thinking," as Richard Rohr say, "we will wonder how we could have ever thought in any other way! Before any new experience, new thinking is difficult and dangerous...or, so we've convinced ourselves. Afterwards, new thinking is natural and even necessary."

Try having a civil conversation with someone whose political views are not yours. Walk or pedal instead of driving. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Attend the church of another denomination some weekend. Try this, go here, change sides, move outside your comfort zone, make new friends with people of a different race or class, let go of your usual role and even of your self-image. It's risky. And when you're done ask yourself, "Did I lose a kidney in the process?" And secondarily, ask yourself, "Am I dead because of the experience?" If you can conclude that you are neither injured nor dead, you just lived yourself into a new way of thinking. You will have just created a new wineskin for the new wine. The next time you attempt such a thing, it will come just that much easier.

A bishop who had begun a hostel for AIDS victims was asked why money was spent to care for such people, many of whom were not Catholics. He responded that we don't help suffering and oppressed people because *they are* Catholic but because *we are*.

Not a bad way to think about Advent. ***Just Do It*** and let the objections of the mind gradually fade away.

Jesus' first contact with tax collectors, as opposed to John the Baptist's first encounter, was not to tell them to repent. It was to have a meal with them and to call them to discipleship. Jesus was wired a little differently than John. You might recall Jesus washing his Apostles' feet on the night of the Last Supper--he just did it. Peter objected by saying, "You will never wash my feet!" Peter could not think his way into another way of living. His mind alone would not get him where Jesus

needed him to be. Neither can our minds. Sometimes you just have to wash feet in the hopes they'll get it afterwards. "Peter, you do not understand *now* what I am doing, but *later* you will understand" (Jn. 13:7). **JUST DO IT.**

~Fr. Phil

