

Let's have a listen to how Eugene Paterson writes this confrontation between John the Baptist and the religious authorities in his translation of the bible called "the Message." |

"Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin! And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire. "

Ouch!!! Of course John is pointing a finger at the religious community. And he's giving no power, or credibility to the place of privilege that religious communities enjoy. Rank, religious upbringing, history of connection to a faith community, years of service, even a once off religious conversion experience counts for nothing in the kingdom of heaven. Kingdom of heaven is Matthew's favourite way of describing the new world order. Your past accounts for nothing, according to John the Baptist. What counts is how that conversion experience is influencing your life now and empowering justice in the world.

Those who have been following my blog this week will know I've actually been wrestling with the purpose of the church. As I consider my own role as a contemporary Pharisee and Scribe – a leader of a faith community, a keeper of the tradition - I wonder what on earthly good churches of all stripes do in the world? I actually think the church does a lot of good, I wouldn't be in it if I thought otherwise. But as I witness the seismic shifts in our culture today, there's enough doubt in me to continue to wonder about the church's role in the world.

I asked the question at lunch on Thursday, when I met with my colleagues in ministry at the other United Churches on the north shore. We all chuckle at the way each of us handles street evangelism, and this story about John the Baptist. We bristle at the more conservative, fundamental denominations that actually take up the practice of busking for God. That's just not our style.

But each of us considered the question pretty critically. All denominations think they have a pretty good understanding of the issues - each believing they have the right way to worship, the right way to read and interpret the bible, the right way to believe, the right way to cast the first theological stone all the while shouting at each other "repent your brood of vipers." So while the whole Christian enterprise gets into a peeing contest about who is more right about the bible, about God, about salvation, the world out there gets on with the business of

compassion. Together as colleagues, we wondered if the louder we become in our arguments, the more silent and irrelevant we become to those who walk by our doors oblivious to our signs and our buildings and now our manger scenes and Christmas decorations.

In a meeting yesterday between St. Clement's Anglican church and leadership from our board, our property redevelopment committee and the trustees to discuss a possible shared property development, we wondered out loud if we are being led to places where the Spirit is already active in the world, having left the church behind because we're too caught in this game of theological one up man ship. (As an aside, when the conversation with St. Clement's goes to a place of serious partnership, you will be asked for your thoughts and opinions. This was a first meeting to crack open the conversation.) Does the church continue to have a purpose? Do we think we're the only ones who have captured the market on meaning and purpose, God talk and the work compassion, the business of right relationships and human development?

It continues to be the story of Christmas that compels me to ask these questions. Because I think it's the story of Christmas that draws us beyond ourselves and into the world where God is already active. You've already heard me say, the story of Christmas is a story that affirms all of life, no matter how crude the circumstances. It's a story that says yes to every child, yes to every family of every constellation, yes to every human relationship that brings life, yes to living respectfully in all of creation. Contrary to shouting "repent you brood of sinners," the Christmas story gently whispers "you are my beloved," to each of us, regardless of how we may feel about ourselves and each other.

"You are my beloved," whispered gently, means your life already has meaning – even in its imperfections, even with debilitating health, broken relationship, chronic addictions. "You are my beloved" doesn't ask anything of you. There is no theological agenda. There is no behaviour modification required. No signatures are necessary. You don't even have to repent. That's how powerful this story is. "You are my beloved." No matter how crude your birth story, no matter how unwelcoming the world seemed to be at your coming, no matter whether your parents were married, simply because of the circumstances of your birth, you are the beloved. And so is your neighbour. And your colleagues, and your crazy aunt Betty and the person you cannot forgive.

When the church puts down its word weapons and its biblical armour, and trusts what it espouses, that the incarnation is about God alive in all of creation, then we will see the Spirit indeed already active. The beloved are already in the world, saying yes to life, removing those things which are inconsistent with life. And ours will not be to shout repent and believe it our way as we fantasize about saving the church from extinction.

Ours will be to join in partnership with the beloved, folks like

- The First United Church Mission in the downtown eastside
- The Northshore Lookout Shelter
- The Northshore Neighborhood house
- The North Vancouver Recreation commission
- St. Andrews United Church, St. Clements Anglican Church

Folks like R & B Dance, and the Library, the pub and the coffee shop, the soccer field and the are hockey arena also holding sacred space, outside the church, so people can connect in real life settings, letting life unfold as it has been created to unfold. Our space is just different. It needs to be. But truth is, we're not alone and we don't know all there is to know about Spirit working to perpetuate a life worth living. As we look beyond the salvation of church, we can see that the Spirit of the one who set life in motion, continues to empower life in places where justice rolls down like a mighty river and peace like an ever flowing stream.

Friends, we are the incarnation. We are the beloved...and because those things are true, we are already the justice makers. Amen.