



Advent 3 2015 All Saints, Ladner

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

And the crowd, (hearing that the time was short) asked John, "What then should we do?" And he said: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

It's around six in the evening about three years ago. I'm walking from my house in Seattle in an urban neighbourhood up and along a street with my dog Teddy to see the Christmas street lights and to do a little Christmas shopping. I've decided to travel light and so I've left

my purse behind, tucking one credit card and some dollar bills into my zippered jacket pocket. When I get up to where the shops began and started my walk down the street, out of the corner of my eye I notice a man sitting at the bus stop. I walk on and as I do, I hear a voice ask “Do you have any change you can spare?” “No” I say as I go the next few steps. But then I stop, turn towards him and add “But I do have some bills.” Astonished, he springs up and bounds towards me as I dig in my zippered pocket for the two dollar bills I have there. I hand these to him and he begins thanking me.

“Oh my God,” he says, still in shock, “Thank you, thank you, sweetheart!”

As this, I extend my hand toward him and say, “My name is Melissa.” At which point he takes my hand and says, “My name is George.”

You may think I am telling you this as a way of bragging about just how generous I am as a person, as a Christian, as your bishop. But the truth of the matter is, my actions were a part of something called “the Generosity Experiment,” a 30-day period that I and others had publicly promised to participate in, in which we would give money to anyone or any organization that asked for it—whether that was a person asking for change on a street corner or whether that person was representing a non-profit or a church asking for a donation either in person or through the mail.

And so that evening, more than anything else, I was simply doing what I said I would.

The “Generosity Experiment” was not something I had invented. It was the idea of one man, Sasha Dichter, the then-director of financial development for an organization called the Acumen Fund, a non-profit that raises money to fund technology projects to improve the living conditions of the poorest of the poor in India, Pakistan and Africa. Dichter, concerned with how often he was saying “no” to others who were asking him for help, wanted to cultivate a new practice, a new reflex that was all about saying “yes.”

I’m telling you about this, of course, because today’s Gospel is about John the Baptist inviting people to participate in a kind of “Generosity Experiment.” In this passage we hear the people wanting to be baptized by John ask him what they should do to act in accordance with the change of heart and practice that their baptism will mean. And this is what John tells them: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” In other words, engage in your own “Generosity Experiment!” John then goes on to say that this same “Generosity Experiment” will also serve as preparation for the coming One, Jesus, the same one we wait for in Advent.

Perhaps it’s obvious that generosity towards others is an appropriate way to prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas. But, at least for me, there’s more at stake this year than most years. For this year, many of us are acutely feeling the grip of a kind of darkness on the face of the earth. This year has been a year of inexplicable violence abruptly intruding into innocent people’s lives. And so this year, you and I may be wondering not only how to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ at Christmas but also how to live as Christian people in the face of a more pervasive darkness—how to live generously rather than out of fear and self-protection, how to retain and expand our “yes” reflex.

And so let me tell you what undertaking your own “Generosity Experiment” can perhaps give you. The only way I can do this, of course, is by telling you what I’d learned during and after mine.

First, I learned that it was a relief to simply say “yes” to others rather than to spend a lot of time figuring out how to say “no.” You see, when asked to give, I typically spend a lot of energy inventing reasons not to give. And so having already decided that I would give something each time I was asked, meant that I got to give up all that misspent energy. And along with it, I got to give up all the feelings of dread, fear, worry and defensiveness that at least for me typically went along with immediately saying “no” or inventing reasons to say “no” later. As it turns out, for me, saying “yes” is a great relief!

Second, I learned that saying “yes” to giving money led to helping others in ways that had nothing to do with money. In other words, the practice of financial generosity led to an openness to other modes of generosity. As an example, about two weeks into my “Generosity Experiment” I just so happened to be driving by the scene of a minor car accident that had just occurred. What I discovered was that this question immediately popped up in my mind: “Does giving to whoever asks for help apply when no one asks for help, but help is clearly needed?” The answer that came back to me was a resounding “yes,” because “yes” has a way of being contagious within us. And so, I did get involved that day. I rather awkwardly helped an older man, who probably should not have been driving at all, make it through the thirty or so minutes of talking with the police until his worried daughter arrived to take him home. And so saying “yes” is contagious within us!

Finally, I learned that cultivating the reflex of saying “yes” is actually God’s sneaky way of expanding our relationships and sense of kinship with others. By the time my “Generosity Experiment” was over, I was on a first-name basis with most of the homeless people in my church’s neighbourhood, had heard many more of their life stories, and had even met some of their family members. I was also more connected to the amazing efforts of many non-profits in my city who were trying to make a difference in the world. And, believe it or not, after the whole month was over, I had only given around \$500 to others. Saying “yes” expands who we understand as family.

And so I learned that the saying of “yes” is more than the giving of a dollar or the writing of a check. It’s about engagement, my own coming, if you will, into the world, often to people who are in the grip of some kind of “no” of their own or some kind of “no” that some other person or situation has dealt them. And so what John the Baptist was telling those clamoring to be baptized was that they and we are, in fact, meant to be God’s own “Generosity Experiment,” sharing what we have but not stopping there. With our outstretched hands and in our own awkward way, we are to be in relationship with others the same way that Christ, our Coming One, will be with us.

Today, the Third Sunday of Advent is what the Church calls “Gaudete” Sunday. It is the Sunday when Advent is more than half over, and so we are to lift up our hearts and rejoice, tasting in advance what will soon be coming our way. We are to do this even as the world continues to be gripped by darkness and even as we feel our own fear and the impulse to self-protection that can come with that fear. But we, dear friends, are made for bigger and better things. We are made, as Jesus himself was, to be a “yes” to the world and its people

both by sharing what we have and sharing who we are. This is the joy we are made for—the joy of God’s own “yes” to us and to the world, God’s own generous, joyful “yes.”