



## **THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT AND OFFICERS DAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, December 13, 2009**

**Kirk Byron Jones, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Professor of Social Ethics and Pastoral Ministry, Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Boston, MA

**Lection - 1 Peter 4:9-11; Luke 7:18-23** (New Revised Standard Version)

#### **1 Peter 4:9-11**

(v. 9) Be hospitable to one another without complaining. (v. 10) Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. (v. 11) Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

#### **Luke 7:18-23**

(v. 18) The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples (v. 19) and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (v. 20) When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” (v. 21) Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. (v. 22) And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. (v. 23) And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Joy is the traditional theme for the third Sunday of Advent. As Advent progresses, joy becomes the dominant human expression. Introduced with Mary’s glad, if surprised, response to her selection as the mother of Jesus, soon angels, shepherds, and magi are not only heralding but joyfully celebrating the unfathomable entrance of God into the world as a baby.

Mirroring the joy build-up of Scripture is the escalation of positive human emotion for many—though not all—during this time of year. The Christmas season buds with awareness and builds

with anticipation. Ideally, the march toward great joy is not only characterized by gift-sharing, social gatherings, and television classics, but solemn moments of spiritual exploration and introspection.

The joining of Officers' Day to this Advent Sunday is an easy bond. First, celebrating servant-leadership in the church can come at no better time than during the period where we joyously await the birth of Jesus, the church's quintessential servant-leader. Second, joy is not just a feature of Advent but a characteristic of the most effective church leaders. Joy for one's work in and outside the church is an amazing energizer for faithful and sustained service to God and the world.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Peter 4:9-11; Luke 7:18-23**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

While Advent represents a sky of widespread hopefulness, such sky is not unclouded. Advent/Christmas season can be more grueling than glorious for those whose lives are already highly stressed. Caregivers, including clergy, are especially vulnerable. Higher than normal expectations and demands during the holiday season may be enough to topple persons who have already been living on the edge of emotional collapse.

Moreover, domestic violence increases as persons feel unable to fulfill what they perceive to be minimal family obligations and responsibilities. Alcoholism, depression, drug addiction, shaken baby-syndrome, suicide, and homicide are horrific signs of the inability to cope with stressors often exacerbated during the holiday season. Thus, perhaps as at no other time in the liturgical year, is the historic therapeutic function of African American preaching and worship more important than during Advent and Christmas.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Luke 7:18-35 may be characterized as the last earthly sighting of Jesus by John the Baptist. Luke is the only gospel which contains all three viewings. John's first sighting of Jesus occurs while he is still in the womb of his mother. It is a spiritual visioning of Jesus that causes baby John to leap in the womb of his mother Elizabeth (Luke 4:1).

The second sighting occurs on the banks of the river Jordan. For days, months, and years, John, infant-turned-iconoclast, had been, with intensity, preaching, baptizing and looking; preaching, baptizing, and looking; preaching, baptizing, and looking. Finally one day he shouted, "There he is!" He'd caught sight of the one who would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 7: 16).

Lastly, Luke records a third sighting of Jesus by John. However, the noticing of him in Luke 7:20 is strikingly different from the earlier ones. The earlier sightings evidenced certainty and excitement. John seemed to know who Jesus really was before Jesus was even born. Moreover, John's unbridled enthusiasm while still in Elizabeth's belly and on Jordan's bank argues for his being acknowledged as the first one who ever "shouted" about Jesus. Yes, Mary, the mother of

Jesus, shouts in Luke 1:46-55 but her shout, no less magnificent than John's, is inspired by what God has done (something worth shouting about) more than it is about who Jesus is.

However, by Luke chapter seven, certainty and enthusiasm are dimmed by John's status behind bars. Glad certainty about Jesus turns to simmering suspicion about him:

“Are you the coming one or do we look for another?” (Luke 7:20).

Considering Luke 7, alongside earlier texts that have John “seeing” Jesus, allows the preacher to address the matter of the changing seasons of faith. It is not always that we see Jesus with “glad eyes.” Sometimes, because of circumstances and choices, our vision of Jesus is blurry and not joyous. But, blurry vision is still vision. And our vision of Jesus does not determine Jesus' vision of himself or how he sees us. Whatever our plight, Jesus is always God's son and, in his eyes, we are always God's children. And there is this good news, too good not to be true: even when we are not certain about God, God is certain about us. This is why we can serve with joy and gladness as officers in the Church and as stewards of God everywhere, even in troubled times.

### **I Peter 4: 9-11**

Hospitable and loving behavior towards others is lauded in this text of practical spirituality. Even more importantly, such behavior is linked to God. The word God is said four times between verses 10 and 11. If believers have any doubt about what is the source of what often are difficult behaviors to practice in pressure situations, the doubt is answered with “God.” Godly behavior would be untenable without God. Precisely because God loves so, we can love so. Precisely because God welcomes so, we can welcome so.

On Officers' Sunday, this text may be used to encourage church leaders to be out front in exhibiting compassion and understanding. To do this is to see Christian leadership in a larger light. More than taking charge of a group or an initiative, Christian leadership is about leading in offering love, forgiveness, and grace to others. Who can question the need for such lavish soulful leadership in our churches and our world today?

### **Challenge**

The focus texts can be brought together with a beautiful challenge to pastor and people alike to *see each other as God sees them*. Jesus' response to the questioning of John was to really look, to consider what was actually being done to help people: “The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them.” (Luke 7: 32) Peter implores the first believers to be first in blessing each other as God blesses each one of them. As we see with the eyes of faith, let us see with the eyes of God. Beholding each other through God's eyes has a positive, powerful influence on our attitudes and actions toward each other. If joy is to take hold of our hearts this Advent season, it will only be done if we see others as God sees them.

### **III. Sermonic Comments or Suggestions**

In The Centering Moment, Howard Thurman prays, "*Make tender our spirits that we may not through callousness of mind or hardness of heart hurt and maim and injure where we could bless and cure and heal.*"<sup>1</sup>

The lead definitions for **tender** in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles<sup>2</sup> will not have people lining up to receive this characteristic: *Soft or delicate in texture and consistency; easily broken, cut, compressed, chewed; not strong or robust; unable to endure hardship and fatigue.*

If we were developing a list of characteristics needed for living in a world where violence and danger were ever present, perhaps “tender” would not make our final list of desirable attributes. On the other hand, tender's original meaning, “to stretch, hold out,” might cause us to think twice about the matter. Would the violence and danger in our world be lessened by the presence of more people who could stretch past their fears and with perseverance, work and wait for redemptive new ways of seeing, listening, and thinking?

### Notes

1. Thurman, Howard. The Centering Moment. 1969. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2000.
2. Trumble, William R., Angus Stevenson, and Lesley Brown. Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.