

Warning: Danger Near (but so is help)

Message for Sunday, December 5, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 3:7-18

A middle-aged man who had been in pretty good health most of his life started feeling faint, and was having dizzy spells and trouble hearing. He went to see his doctor, who gave him a thorough physical examination. The doctor ordered blood tests, urine tests, X-rays, a CAT scan – the whole works. The man had put on a few pounds, but everything else came back normal. The doctor referred him to an internist, a cardiologist and a neurologist, and they couldn't find anything unusual either. There was nothing wrong with the man, as far as modern medicine could determine.

All the while, the symptoms continued, and indeed were getting worse. He realized that his end was near, so he started preparing for his death. He gave away his motorbike, his boat and all his other toys. He gave most of his household goods to relatives and friends. He moved into a small apartment with just a few furnishings. He sold his house and donated some of the proceeds to his church and his favourite charities. The rest he put into savings, so he would have money to pay rent and other expenses. He went to the local funeral home and made arrangements for his burial. Finally he went to a men's clothing store to buy a new outfit to be buried in.

He told the sales clerk that he wanted an entire outfit, from socks to necktie. The clerk showed him around the store and the man selected the style of clothes he wanted for his outfit. The clerk measured him for size, and brought out the items to try on. All went well until the man picked up his new shirt to put on. "This is the wrong size. I wear a shirt with a size 16 neck."

The sales clerk checked his figures and replied, "But sir, I just measured you, and you have a size 18 neck."

The man replied, "I don't care what you measured. I've always worn a size 16 shirt. Now get me one."

The clerk said, "Well, OK, sir. It's up to you. But if you wear a shirt that's too tight around the neck, you'll feel faint, have dizzy spells and trouble hearing."

How do you respond when someone tells you something that you'd rather not hear? I know what I do: I feel defensive; I think of arguments to support my way; or I may simply deny it and pretend the problem doesn't exist. At least, that's my immediate reaction. After I've had time to think about it, I may come around.

John the Baptist was a preacher sent by God to warn the people of danger: if they didn't stop doing wrong and turn back to God's ways, they would be under severe judgement. We see how various people responded to his message:

Luke 3:7-9, New Living Translation:

Here is a sample of John's preaching to the crowds that came for baptism: "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming judgement? Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God. Don't just say, 'We're safe — we're the descendants of Abraham.' That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham. Even now the axe of God's judgement is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."

The crowd asked, "What should we do?"

John replied, "If you have two coats, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."

Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?"

"Show your honesty," he replied. "Make sure you collect no more taxes than the Roman government requires you to."

"What should we do?" asked some soldiers.

John replied, "Don't extort money, and don't accuse people of things you know they didn't do. And be content with your pay."

Some people were cut to the heart by John's preaching. They knew deep down that what he was saying was right, and they wanted to get right with God. Some people were indifferent; they didn't care. And some were deeply offended by John's preaching, and never accepted his message [see Luke 7:30; 20:5].

No one likes to be told that they're wrong, especially the ones who *know* they are right! Some people are so utterly convinced that their way is the right way — indeed, the *only* way — that almost nothing will get them to change.

There was an officer in the navy who had always dreamed of commanding a battleship. He finally achieved that dream and was given commission of the newest and proudest ship in the fleet. One stormy night, as the ship plowed through the seas, the captain was on duty on the bridge when off to the port he spotted a strange light rapidly closing with his own vessel. Immediately he ordered the signalman to flash the message to the unidentified craft, "Alter your course ten degrees to the south." Only a moment had passed before

the reply came: “Alter your course ten degrees to the north.” Determined that his ship would take a backseat to no other, the captain snapped out the order to be sent: “Alter course ten degrees — I am the CAPTAIN!” The response beamed back, “Alter your course ten degrees — I am Seaman Third Class Jones.” Now infuriated, the captain grabbed the signal light with his own hands and fired off: “Alter course, I am a battleship.” The reply came back. “Alter your course, I am a lighthouse.”

We may not like the truth, but that doesn’t change it. We can deny the truth, we can argue against it, we can be offended by it, or we can believe it — but none of that changes the truth.

And the truth is, my friends, that
 all of us have done wrong;
 all of us need to repent
 all of us need forgiveness
 all of us need Jesus in our lives.

William Willimon was the chaplain at Duke University in North Carolina, and one of the most quoted preachers in North America. In one sermon he talked about this message of John the Baptist. He concluded with these words:

Now we began this service with confession. We confess in order that we might be forgiven. We confess, then the minister pronounces words of forgiveness.

No. That’s not quite right. We are forgiven, *therefore* we are able to confess. We can confess because we end this service with Christ’s invitation to His Table. We can lay down the burden of our self-deception *because* he has invited us saying, “Come to this table, all you who are weak and heavy burdened and I will give you rest.”

Danger is near. But help is ever nearer. Jesus is here with us right now. Let us accept his invitation, join with him, and find the grace that we need.