

Reflection—Cathy Dempsey—12/13/2015

When I was reading today's Gospel passage several weeks ago, I noticed something I hadn't paid attention to before. John the Baptist is preaching to the crowds, and different groups of people start coming to him, asking him what they should do. The tax collectors ask him, "What should we do?" and John tells them, "Don't collect more than you're supposed to." The soldiers ask what they should do, and John says, "Don't practice extortion, don't falsely accuse people, be satisfied with your wages." And so on.

What's interesting, though, is the people's response. They hear what John is saying, and they all start murmuring and speculating: "Wow—this guy is pretty amazing! Do you think he could be the Messiah?" You think about what he was saying, though, and you realize it was pretty basic-- "Do what you're supposed to do. Do your job. Don't lie. Don't steal. If you've got more than you need, share."

John the Baptist is only giving them the basics, what they need to do to prepare their hearts and minds for the One who is to come. He is not telling them anything they haven't heard before. He is only reminding them how to lay the foundation. When John hears them speculating how he might be the Messiah, he tells them no-- he says "... one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John knows that the Messiah will make possible a transformation so great and so deep, it is like nothing they have seen before. Following the rules and obeying the laws is a good

start, a good foundation, but it is only the beginning. Jesus calls us to a much deeper, more radical change—a change of heart.

There's a story that has been told in different ways by different authors, but I'd like to read this version, from Cynthia Bourgeault's "The Wisdom Way of Knowing."

"Once upon a time, in a not-so-far-away land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses... There were .. recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped out of the blue by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, "We... are... that!"

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: "So tell us, how would we become that tree?" "Well," he said, pointing downward, "it has something to do with going into the ground... and cracking open the shell."

"Insane," they responded. "Totally morbid. Why, then we wouldn't be acorns anymore."

Jesus teaches us and models for us how we as individuals and, in fact, the world can be transformed by pouring ourselves out in love, trusting in the Creator who gave us all that we have. Jesus calls us to radical actions like forgiving people 7 X 70 times. (Ouch—that has been a

tough one for me recently). He teaches us that following him requires loving our enemies, doing good for those who hurt us.

Jesus calls us to break bread together, he calls us to eat his body and drink his blood, he calls us to be his body. He calls us to gather together and pray in his name, with word and song. He also calls us to go into our private room, lock the door, and pray to our Father in secret-- to find God in stillness and silence, without words. It's not just about following the rules—it's about deepening our relationship with God and with others.

If we follow Jesus in this way, we will be transformed and live in the world described by Zephaniah in today's first reading. We will shout for joy, we will never again need to fear disaster. God will be in our midst and keep us safe. God will rejoice over us and be glad and show us love once more.

Being an acorn is okay to start with. But Jesus tells us to trust God—become the oak tree.