

The Greatest

Luke 7:18-28

The Third Sunday in Advent, December 13, 2015

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

John the Baptist has guts. I would mention that he has another part of the male anatomy, but I am standing in the pulpit, so I will content myself with pointing out that John the Baptist has guts. He has nerve. He haschutzpah.

John the Baptist actually fears God above all things. He believes the saying that we are not to be afraid of those who can only kill the body and after that can do nothing, rather we are to fear the One who can kill both body and soul in hell. Therefore John fears God more than he fears any human being. He fears God more than He fears the kings of the earth. John's record of ministry bears witness to his fear of God.

Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee. He ruled over Galilee. As tetrarch of Galilee he had agreements with other local rulers so that they could rule their respective territories together. While he did not have total jurisdiction over John who was preaching along the Jordan in Judea, he still would have been a threat to John. Herod was committing adultery with his brother's wife. Since Herod was royalty it is not like he had to keep it a secret. Herod was part of Roman society. The Roman royalty generally condoned such sins in their midst. Herod committed this sin with impunity except for John the Baptist.

John is the prophet of God. God called him to preach repentance. John preached repentance according to his calling. He preached repentance to everyone. The way of the Lord was to be prepared for everyone. It was to be prepared for the poorest of the poor and for the highest of kings. Herod was no exception. Therefore John reproved Herod.

One wonders how John did this. The only record of communication from John is his preaching along the banks of the Jordan River. That being the case it is safe to assume that John reproved Herod by preaching against Herod's adultery. You may think that such preaching is a violation of the Eighth Commandment in that it damaged Herod's reputation, but Herod being king was a public figure. As a public figure his adultery was well known. John is not revealing anything that the people did not already know. He reprovess Herod in public for his sin. Even the king is not above God. Even the king needs to repent of his sins.

The problem with reprovess a king in ancient Galilee is that there are no freedom of speech laws to protect John the Baptist. Herod may put to death with impunity anyone who speaks against him. Therefore when Herod heard John preaching against his personal life, he took offense at John's preaching and locked him up in prison. Eventually Herod had John beheaded.

John knew all of this when he preached against the sins of Herod. John knew this when he told Herod to repent of his sins. But John feared God more than he feared the king. Herod can only kill John and after that he can do nothing. God can cast John the Baptist into hell. It was therefore wiser to fear God than to fear the king and so John the Baptist told the king to repent.

John the Baptist has nerve. John the Baptist has guts. John the Baptist haschutzpah.

John the Baptist puts the rest of us human beings to shame. He really does. Hardly any of us have the nerve that he had. Hardly any of us have the guts that he had. Hardly any of us are willing to risk our lives for the sake of keeping the vocation to which God has called us. Many of us human beings face persecutions far less scary than the ones that John faced and yet we capitulate to our fears. We withhold the Word of God in the places where we were commanded to proclaim it. And we withhold it in the face

of small things like a lost relationship or someone being upset with us. Hardly any of us face death for the sake of the Word of God, but John did and he did not let death stop him from telling the truth. He did not let lost relationships with other people deter him from his relationship with God. He did not let the fact that some people were going to be mad at him for the rest of their lives stop him from telling them the truth. John the Baptist puts us all to shame.

He believes that there is a God. He believes that this God is wrathful God. He believes that and so he fears God and does as he is instructed even if it cost him his life.

John the Baptist really is the greatest man who was ever born among women.

And yet the person who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John is.

Who are the people who are in the Kingdom of God? The people who are in the Kingdom of God are the people who are not offended at Jesus. The people in the Kingdom of God are not offended by what Jesus does and how He does it. The people in the Kingdom of God are not offended by what Jesus says and how He says it. The people who are in the Kingdom of God are the people who read the New Testament and believe the accounts that the apostles give of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The people who are in the Kingdom of God actually believe that Jesus from Nazareth was conceived miraculously in the womb of a virgin named Mary. The people who are members of the Kingdom of God actually believe that Jesus from Nazareth gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. The people who are members of the Kingdom of God read the accounts of Jesus from Nazareth purifying lepers and casting out demons and believe that Jesus from Nazareth actually did those things. The people who are members of the Kingdom of God read the accounts of Jesus from Nazareth raising the dead and they believe that Jesus actually brought dead people back to life. The people who are members of the Kingdom of God actually believe every word that Jesus spoke. They believe that their sins are forgiven for the sake of His death and resurrection. They believe in His resurrection.

The people who are members of the Kingdom of God do not give up this faith in the face of persecution or ridicule. They believe in the miraculous and they believe that the miraculous is centered in this fellow from Nazareth called Jesus. They believe in a world that is more than what they can see. They believe in a world that is filled with devils and angels who do battle over the creation. They believe in a God who reigns over all and Jesus from Nazareth is sitting at His right hand. They believe that this God created the whole world in six days. They believe that this Jesus from Nazareth will return at some point in the future with power and great glory. They believe that Jesus from Nazareth will then raise all of the dead and judge them.

The people who are members of the Kingdom of God read their New Testaments and believe every word of the New Testament the way the New Testament intends for its words to be taken. They listen to the preaching of the New Testament and hear the works and deeds of Jesus and they rejoice.

They are greater than John the Baptist because they hear about the words and deeds of Jesus and they rejoice. They are not offended at the way that Jesus from Nazareth does things.

Yes, if you were paying attention to the Gospel reading you heard right. John the Baptist is questioning whether or not Jesus is the One who was to come or should they expect someone else. To put the question in more obvious terms to us: John is wondering whether or not Jesus is actually the promised Savior.

I think sometimes that we look at John's question to our Lord and wonder whether or not John is simply testing the Lord or seeking more information from the Lord. I think that we look at the nerve and chutzpa of John the Baptist and we say to ourselves that surely such a man of faith would never be

offended by Jesus. And yet when our Lord hears the question that John the Baptist puts to Him He says that those who are not offended by Him are blessed which implies that John the Baptist is offended at the way that Jesus conducts His ministry.

Let me explain to you why John the Baptist is offended at the ministry of Jesus from Nazareth. Isaiah prophesied that the Holy Spirit would anoint the Messiah and that the Messiah would proclaim freedom for the prisoners and liberty for the captives. Isaiah furthermore prophesies that the Messiah would give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf and cause the lame to walk. Well, Jesus from Nazareth had given sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He had made the lame to leap to say nothing of His casting out of demons and purifying lepers. If Jesus was doing those things and claiming to be the Messiah why was he not also releasing the prisoners? John the Baptist was in prison. Herod had put him in prison because he did not like it that John the Baptist was preaching against his adultery and telling him to repent of it. Understandably John the Baptist wanted to be released from prison. If Jesus from Nazareth were really the Messiah, John wanted to know why Jesus had not released John from prison. Since Jesus had not released John from prison he sends messengers to Jesus to ask him if He was the one who was to come or should they expect someone else, someone who would set John free from prison.

Our Lord's answer reveals something profound about our graves. Our Lord, Jesus from Nazareth, insists that He was the One who was to come. He insists that He is the One about whom Isaiah prophesied. He had been anointed with the Holy Spirit at His baptism. He had healed the sick. He had given sight to the blind. He had given hearing to the deaf. He had made the lame to walk. He had even forgiven them of their sins. And then our Lord adds this one item to Isaiah's prophecy: the dead are raised.

Jesus raises the dead. Luke records the resurrection of the widow's son at Nain. Apparently our Lord raised more people from the dead than the Gospels give specific record. Enough were raised from the dead for John's messengers to witness the resurrections. If raising someone from the dead doesn't prove that you are a Messiah, I don't know what does. But that does mean that when our Lord releases the prisoners from prison and proclaims liberty to the captives. He is liberating people from their graves. He is freeing them from their sins.

Our sins really are prison houses. We cannot release ourselves from them. We cannot wind the clock backwards and go back and relive our life and avoid the sins that we have committed. And we repeat some sins over and over again in a morbid fashion knowing that they are wrong, knowing that they do us no good and yet continually repeating them as if we do not know what else to do with ourselves. The Messiah releases you from that prison house. He proclaims to you liberty from your captivity from which you could not release yourself.

Our graves really are prison houses. There is no one in the grave who can free themselves from the grave. None of us can free the dead from their graves even though we wish we could. As one of our Easter hymns puts it: Who are you who walk in sorrow down Emmaus' barren road, hearts distraught and hope defeated bent beneath grief's crushing load? Nameless mourners we will join you, we who also mourn our dead; we have stood by graves unyielding, eaten death's bare, bitter bread. How many times I sit in my study and listen to the cars drive by going into the cemetery to look at the graves. How many times I have taken chaff from the flower beds of the parsonage to the burn pile and walked past a car in the cemetery driving slowly past the stones looking at the dead. How many times have I come home from an afternoon call to find one of you after work driving through the cemetery to look at the ones that you love. And when I lock the south door of the church at night there are all of the lights on the graves

that you have put there. There are the decorations for Christmas and then later for Easter and then for Memorial Day and then for the fall. Some of you decorate the graves like you would your own homes because you love the people who are lying out there and you can do nothing about their estate.

But that simply means that you are least in the Kingdom of God. You are the least, the sinners, the ones who will shortly join the dead in the prison house of their graves and then people will drive by the cemetery looking for you.

But the least in the Kingdom of God are also the ones who read the accounts of what Jesus from Nazareth accomplished and they believe them! The least in the Kingdom of God are the ones who hear the mighty acts of Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed and they believe that He actually did all of those things! They believe that He went around and healed the sick including the blind, the deaf, and the lame. They believe that He went around and forgave sinners. The least in the Kingdom of God even believe that He has forgiven them. They believe that Jesus raised the dead and set the captives free from the ultimate prison house. And the least in the Kingdom of God believe that this Jesus from Nazareth who is currently seated at the right hand of the Father will come again in glory and release them from their graves for life everlasting.

The least in the Kingdom of God still drive through cemeteries, but they drive through them in hope. They still decorate graves, but they decorate them in hope. The least in the Kingdom of God still fear God and fear death, but they fear it knowing that it is temporary, a sleep to which their sins have committed them for a time, but from which they will awaken to the glorious face of their Savior.

And so the least in the Kingdom of God are not offended by Jesus and between that and the fact that they are members of the new order or the New Testament while John the Baptist is a member of the Old, as great as John was and as much nerve and chutzpah as he had the members of the Kingdom of God are still greater than John.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.