



Most of us - know what it is like - at least some of the time - to feel left out. Feeling like we don't quite belong. Others seem so confident, so sure of themselves - as insiders who know the ropes. They are comfortable in a group in which we feel we don't fit.

One of the ways we have of responding to this is to form our own club - or join one that will have us. Here is at least one place where we are "in" and others are not. The clubs range from political to cultural to economic or social. They can sometimes be on-line communities, internet tribes, facebook groups, and twitter followings. Identity comes partly from who is included and who is excluded. There is strength in maintaining strong boundaries for membership in these groups. Members and potential members know what the club or group is about and what it is not about. This can be helpful in keeping the group focussed and on point with their mission and purpose. We can learn a lot from how these groups are forming and growing today.

For churches, this approach also carries with it a hidden cost. The price we pay for unintentionally keeping other people out in order to maintain who we are may be a contraction of reality and can lead to the weakening of our relational fabric. Boundaries are meant to offer clarity about identity - and ways to join in and to belong. They are meant to give shape and direction to the church. Churches need plenty of doors into the life and the gift we have been given and have to share. Churches today are to be looking for ways to interpret who we are so that people can receive what is being offered. And that

is going to include doing something different than we have been doing.

John the Baptist lived in a day in which the situation was quite similar. There were many people - the people of the land - the Gentiles - non religious people - including the soldiers and tax collectors - who were excluded from the religious life of that day and did not fit into the religious groups. People were finding their own ways to connect yet the religious people did not make room for them in their groupings. Acceptance and relationships with each other and God were not available. Rules and boundaries that were meant to give clarity were being used to keep people outside.

So in comes this bold, brassy, direct and shocking figure out in the wilderness shouting "Prepare the Way of the Lord." And the good established religious people in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns and villages came streaming out to the boat docks to hear him. What was he doing out there? What was he saying out there?

His non-verbal message was that you are not going to get it if you stay where you are. You are going to have to leave your comfortable places behind and come out to a deserted wilderness place - a place where you don't have all of the comforts and distractions of home - in order to take in the message that you need to hear. There needs to be a shift in your usual lifestyle so that the words you are about hear do not

simply wash over and fail to land. So the desert was a symbol of where they actually were in their lives.

We can picture all of these good folks traveling out to this word event experience in the wilderness starring John the Baptist - or as one of my professors used to call him - J-Bap. And people are coming from miles around - to the river in the desert - water flowing in the wilderness - water of repentance and opening to new life. It reminds me of the accounts during the Civil War that were told of the socially elite folks in Washington D.C. who took their horses and carriages out to Bull Run in Northern Virginia to watch the battle of Union and Confederate armies on the rolling hills in the countryside. It did not come through for them right away what it was that they were witnessing.

It didn't come through right away for the people in John's day either. They were coming out to John by the river to be baptized because it was the thing to do. What they saw was a wild hairy man wearing wild animal skins and eating wild honey and locusts. They weren't prepared for what they were about to hear. His message was no less tame.

*You brood of snakes - what do you think you are doing? Do you think a little water on your backs is going to deflect God's judgment? It is your life that must change - and that doesn't happen just by coming out here. And don't think that claiming your religious credentials is going to have any effect. God can and is making His people from whoever He chooses. What counts is how you choose to live your life.*

What he said was this - you people are living small lives. Instead of standing up and living God's way, you are staying close to the ground, not visible, not able to see or hear what is really going on. There is a whole world out there that you are missing. And by doing so, you are actually dangerous - because your lives are not reflecting the message you know. You know it but you are not living it. You are using religion as a shield from life rather than a path into life. You are meant to be a connected people, not simply shuffling off going about your own business.

His message to the religious people of his day and the people of faith in our day is this: it is not the group or club you belong to that counts. It is how you live your lives. Do what you say. Connect with people around you. Open the doors of your heart, come off your perch, and be Christ in the world don't just claim him on Sundays.

The people then - and we today - find ourselves asking this question:

*So - what should we do? And he said: If you have two coats, give them away. Do the same with your food.*

There were others at the river in the desert who came there with legitimate questions. They were not the religious people - some were the despised tax collectors - they were the people who

were looking for what it meant to live in line with God's plan. They also wanted to be baptized. They asked John:

*What then should we do? And he said - deal honestly with people. Collect only what is due.*

And there were also soldiers- also people who were not in the religious communities of the day. And they asked John:

*And we - what should we do? And he said: No shakedowns, threats or false accusations - use your authority for good and be satisfied with your wages.*

J-Bap offered a sermon that day that is as necessary today as it was then. We could call this his sermon by the river - prefacing and preparing his hearers for Jesus' sermon on the mount that would come later. Here are John's powerful words from that event by the river:

**Live lives worthy of your faith in God and God's faith in you.**

**Stand up and be accountable for the gifts you have been given.**

**Share generously from your heart.**

**Maintain integrity in your dealings with other people.**

**Use the abilities and opportunities you have to influence others for good.**

**Trust that you are enough and you have enough.**



The reality of our identity with God as grounded in our baptisms is to be demonstrated in the way we live. And Blessedness is not meant for a few. It is God's intention that religious people, tax collectors, soldiers - and lets add - homeless people, mothers on welfare, unemployed fathers, young people looking for identity in gangs, those who have experienced violence in their families, people working 3 jobs to make ends meet, elderly in nursing homes are blessed in God's sight. AND - are to live in ways that reflect blessedness with them.

We should be aware that living God's way has its own rewards - as well as potential cost. J -Bap lost his life because of his inclusive message of repentance and living lives in line with God.

We are being called to do something that is revolutionary. It has the potential to transform lives. That is powerful.

What then should we do? In the next 3 weeks, find some food in your pantry to share or an extra jacket to take it to Manna House or another homeless shelter. Hold them in your hands before you give them. What might happen when you share them? What shift might take place within your heart if you chose to make generosity your lifestyle? What might happen to your need for security and control? Commit to one simple act at a time. Mark a date on your calendar that is a month from now. When that date arrives, assess any change you have experienced within yourself.

Illustration: Me, Mark Pruitt and Ingrid after the Hot Metal Bridge seminar - passing the woman sitting on the step on the street in Pittsburgh.

Know that each action motivated by generosity is shifting the status quo and making room for people to share the Good News that is for all.