

Sermon Manuscript – December 4, 2016 @ Our Saviour – Croton-on-Hudson

Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditation upon all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing to you, my God, my Rock and my Redeemer, AMEN!

There are few things that we expect so little from at the moment, but expect so much from in the future as our children. And yet, I think we are regularly surprised by the unexpected things our children do in their formative years, and while we are certainly proud of them when they grow up, their individuality takes over by the teen years, and their lives almost always move in a different direction than what we expected early on. While we love, nurture, support and are proud of our children when they are little, we adults tend to underrate them, we underestimate what they listen to, learn and perceive, and we're often unready for things they do or say. Things that may just be amusing to us, but can also be game changing. And yes, this happens quite often in church life. On Art Linkletter's classic TV show "Kids Say the Darndest Things", Linkletter posed this exegetical question to a 6-year old girl: "What do we learn from the story of Jesus turning water into wine?" Her answer: "The more wine we get, the better the wedding is". Ok – that is a surprisingly perceptive answer, but I want to tell you a story of a child that did something even more surprising and perceptive, and how it turned a pastor and congregation's perspective around 180 degrees.

A three-year old boy, close to turning four, had been a challenge to his mother and father. He was very energetic, could not sit still, had an active sense of adventure, and was almost fearless in exercising his curiosity. His parents regularly went to church, and the boy's dad was active in the worship life of the congregation, so the young boy almost always sat with his mother, at the rear of the church. Mom was always occupied with restraining the child, first with activities, then with physical force where necessary. Eventually, this would not be enough,

and she would take her son out of the worship space so he would not be a disruption to other people. Sometimes another adult would be willing to take him and occupy him so his mother could get a break and participate in worship, but that wasn't always the case.

One weekend the congregation went away on retreat and at Sunday worship, Mom and Dad sat together with the excitable youngster. It was a more relaxed environment on retreat, and children were permitted to roam a bit more than on a usual Sunday. Mom and Dad were doing their best to keep the boy behind them as they were seated in the back row, and still participate in the worship service. However, just as the sermon was about to begin, the boy wandered away, up to the front of the worship space, and plopped down right in front of where the pastor was starting to preach. When the boy's mother saw this, she reflexively began to rise from her chair to retrieve him, but wary of having more attention drawn to this than necessary, the boy's father stopped her and asked her to wait.

The parents' eyes were fixed on the boy as Pastor Chris began to preach. Oddly enough, the boy seemed to be paying attention to the pastor and not being the disruptive element the parents had expected. About 2 minutes into the sermon, Pastor Chris confessed that he hadn't really prepared a message for the day, mostly due to some personal emergencies that had arisen during the week. He seemed emotional about it, and certainly apologetic that he was about to let the people down and not give them the Gospel message they were all expecting. At one point during his apology, two squeaky words rose up from the front of the worship space. "Pastor, Pastor". A few seconds later, the assembly heard them again - "Pastor, Pastor". In both cases Pastor Chris did his best to pay no attention to that little boy calling out to him. But on the third cry, a little louder than the first two, the little boy shouted "Pastor, Pastor". This time Pastor Chris acknowledged the interruption, and looked down at the little boy, allowing him to speak. The little boy then said "Pastor, Love your neighbor as yourself!" The

worshippers were stunned into a dramatic pause. Pastor Chris stopped down and picked up the boy, hoisting him on his shoulders and said “Preach, little brother. Preach”. Pastor Chris was able to go on from there and delivered a fine sermon, but the Gospel was preached that day by an unexpected voice – a little child that led by saying five simple words, his parents didn’t even realize he knew.

We might look at today’s lessons as a tale of two children, full of surprises and great expectations. Two children that rose from relative obscurity to lead the world into a new movement, bringing new life out of something that the world had left for dead, and expected never to return. The first of these children we meet all grown up in Matthew’s gospel and we know him as John the Baptist. Little John, we see, is quite the character, isn’t he? Can you imagine what this community would say about someone who came out of nowhere and camped himself down by the river at Croton Point Park wearing nothing but an animal skin wrap, while wading in the Hudson to perform hundreds of ritual baptisms? Perhaps he would be a curiosity to us, or maybe we would just dismiss him as a religious nut. Some of us might go and see him, even if just to take our measure. As we approached him, what would we think if he shouted at us: “You Brood of Vipers! – what are you doing here?” John comes across here as more shock jock than pastor, more antagonist than comforter, more agitator than reconciler, not what we expect or desire from our religious leaders today. All of this “in your face” religion from an obvious zealot would just turn us all off and we would just not pay attention. And to top this all off, John, without any modern trigger warnings, then uses the “R” word, a word that has become dirty in our modern spiritual practices. The “R” word stands for “Repentance”. John tells the gathering crowd to repent, and to bear fruit worthy of that repentance. At this point, we might just stop listening because John is too judgmental, too pushy, too insensitive

and too politically incorrect for our tastes. A pastor who calls out his congregation from the pulpit to repent is either a religious right-wing hypocrite, or a disciple of the theology of guilt.

Unfortunately, the word repent has been coopted and corrupted by centuries of bad theology and bad practice in the church that goes on even today, and in the name of John the Baptist, I would like to do what I can today to reclaim the idea of repentance for the sake of the Holy Gospel. You see the Greek Word translated as repentance is METANOIA, which means a turning around, or a changing of course. Too often, the church has emphasized repentance as a turning FROM bad behaviors, and in doing so forced people to dwell on their past mistakes and the doom that was coming if they failed to change. Too often repentance has been wrongly characterized as performing required acts of penance, where the guilt of the people was used as a way to conform people to certain moral behaviors, and even worse to extort money from them for the privilege. The church has spent too little time on what a call to repentance turns us toward, and in fairness to John the Baptist, his call to repentance is forward looking – it is a call to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” – it is a call to witness the coming of Jesus Christ – it is the call to the faithful in the season of Advent. And so, I call all of us to repent!

But my friends, I’m not going to call your attention backwards, at least not in the sense of taking a confessional re-examination of your lives, to have you dwell on the mistakes you have made. But I want to call you forward in faithfulness to the promises of God, the promises made possible by the life of the other little child we hear about in today’s stories, the promised future we hear in Isaiah’s prophecies, which becomes a present reality by John’s announcement that the Lord is coming. The Lord is here!

Too often the call to repentance stirs up fear in our hearts, fear we haven’t done enough, fear that we must trudge backward through our own guilt in order to work out a new life for ourselves, fear that the entire world is ready to judge us for not measuring up. But I

assure you that true repentance is not about keeping score in a game you can't win, it's about trusting that turning toward the one who has already won the game will bring about the fruit of repentance for which John is calling.

Any of us who have raised children know what a life-changer that first child is to new parents. As new parents, all our attention is turned away from the things we did as a childless couple and is now focused on the welfare of this new life that has been placed among them. We don't realize it, but this too is a form of repentance. While new parents are tending to and nurturing this new life, the child is leading the parents to a new future, one filled with promise and expectations. The past gives way to a new present and a promising future, because as parents, we change the course of our lives, turning toward the life of the child.

Isaiah talks about a child that will change our perspective, and turn us toward a life of renewed purpose. The prophet tells us about new life emerging from something everyone once considered to be dead; the tender green shoots show us the way of repentance is one of goodness, justice, peace and understanding. It does not matter what has happened before. God promises forgiveness for God's people and calls us all to turn toward that forgiveness as the foundation for bearing the fruit of repentance. Our pasts never have final say on our lives. Our present is a time to repent and our futures are loaded with potential to live in a new and glorious dwelling, where the fullness and entirety of God's creation lives in peace and harmony.

But while this vision of prey lying peacefully with their predators, and children playing around the dens of poisonous snakes without worry seems so hopeful, it remains for us today just that – a hope. We know that despite these promises, despite the faith we have that God has done something new through the birth of Emmanuel, we live in a world where that vision seems far from being realized. There are too many predators in the world that prey on their victims through systems that perpetuate injustice. There are too many poisonous serpents in

the world that ruthlessly attack others who are simply trying to live their lives. Lions and wolves and bears and leopards are programmed to devour those who appear to be weaker, meeker and defenseless. We wonder if this vision is promise, or if it is simply folly.

This is why our time of Advent is important. It's not just a time to count down the days until we wish Happy Birthday to the baby Jesus, not just a time to return to our Christmas traditions, and not just a time to renew the joy of giving gifts to each other. While all those are important parts of celebrating Christmas, they are hollow remembrances without a time to remember the promise of what this new life means, the promise of turning around and living life on a new course, the promise and the potential of how one little child can change everything for us.

My friends, don't be afraid of being called to repentance. It is one gift that will sustain you and promises not to disappoint, because it is the one that does not depend on our past, and depends only on turning toward the work God has done through the promise of Emmanuel.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guide our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen!