**SERMON Luke 3:1-18**

**Introduction**

I have learned, over the course of my adult years at least, that I am a person that appreciates a certain amount of precision. And I have to wonder if there aren’t some others here that recognize this trait in themselves or someone you know.

Now, I love talking generally about all manner of things, but when it comes to organization or getting something done – I want to be precise, clear about what the end goal it. Tell me what you want. Be specific about how you see a project or task happening or how this space or room to look like or team to function. Tell me what you expect *my* role to be in that. And if specificity or details aren’t your thing, I’ll likely impose my own…on not just myself, but probably on you as well…so sorry in advance, I promise that I’m working on it.

And for those of you who took the Enneagram course with Pastor Lori and Tom, you’ll be unsurprised to know that these patterns of thought and behavior, placing a high value on order and efficiency, align neatly with that Type 1 personality. And I know that I’m not alone in this room.

Many of us, across multiple personality types, skill sets and backgrounds though, really want to have some sense of assurance that we’re doing the right thing, that our contributions in this world matter, that we aren’t operating in isolation from one another, but that there’s some sort of coordinated effort towards a shared goal. So, we often find ourselves in places like this…churches, places of worship, learning and serving, to partner with others who deeply desire connection and purpose, and maybe find out what we should do.

**Passage - Question**

That quest, for precision and clarity, for belonging and purpose, is one we hear repeated by the people that have gathered to listen to John the Baptist and be baptized by him. I wonder if you noticed.

In verse 7 we get a little bit of the context and the opening line to John’s sermon, “You children of snakes!” And, you’ll be pleased to know that I scrapped that same opening for this morning, you’re welcome. Then in verse 8 we get the core of John’s message, “Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.” He goes on to explain that there’s no exemption to this directive. It doesn’t matter if you have a claim to the blood line or spiritual lineage of Abraham the Patriarch. John wants his followers to know that if you have truly experienced inner transformation then there should be something to show for it, externally. Inner transformation, from self-centered perspectives and self-serving actions to selflessness, will result in different fruit.

Now, I am so grateful for the people in the crowd, who like me, want clarity and need John to get real precise about what he’s talking about. They are the individuals who came to this meeting with notepads and pens for color-coding. Ok, I can see them now, jotting down *“Produce fruit”* and then peeking over to their neighbor wondering if they missed the next part*.* Mouthing, “*What does that mean?”* and then raising their hand to ask, “*Excuse me* *John, Mr. Baptist, I going to need you to get more specific here. If I personally was to ‘produce fruit,’ as you say, what would that look like?”* There was definitely some Enneagram 1 folk in the wilderness listening to John, I’m sure of it.

And so we get this beautiful repeating question that resonated strongly with me this week. Starting in verse 10, “The crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?” In verse 12 the tax collectors jump in and ask him, well if that’s what they’re doing, “What should we do?” Finally, in verse 14 the soldiers ask, “What about us?” We’re not tradespeople, farmers, or tax collectors, “What should we do?” Tell us John, be precise, give us specific direction, how does all of this fit together? What does it mean to produce fruit?

**Today - Question**

Folks, you feel it and I feel it, we at the stage in this country, in this pandemic, in our life as a church where we’re hungry for some precision, some clear direction amidst the chaos of a rapidly changing world. We, like John’s listeners, crowding into the wilderness to be baptized, deeply sense that God is still speaking and moving in this world, changing hearts and lives. But, where is the fruit? How is the inner transformation working itself out, externally, to bring about transformation in our communities?

It’s easy to feel adrift in a world that is still reeling from a global illness, adrift in a country that remains deeply polarized, in a city that still bears the bitter wounds of racial discrimination, in a building and community of faith where in the past 18 months we have had to press pause on some of our activity to keep everyone safe. And all I want to do is call up John the Baptist, and ask, “What about us? What should we do? And don’t skimp on the details, be precise please John. What does producing fruit look like for me? For us?”

**Passage – Response**

Fortunately, if you’ve read between the questions John does not leave his listeners hanging. Folks in the crowd, producing fruit for you looks like donating one of your extra shirts, instead of accumulating stuff, share what you have with others who do not have. Tax collectors, accountants, investors, and those working with money, don’t take advantage and prey on the vulnerable, looking to extract or manipulate someone else for your gain, instead be satisfied with what you have and don’t cheat others out of what they have. Soldiers, don’t harass or demean others, treat people fairly and with dignity…even if you work for the empire and hold positions of power (v.12-14).

**Today - Response**

I hope you are beginning to sense the deep implications that John’s message has for us today. We too, want direction, are hungry for purpose, to contribute and play a meaningful part in something larger than ourselves. And this is not a new message. So, in my sacred imagination, after John’s declaration to “Produce fruit”…

I hear: Educators and students today ask, “what should we do?” Don’t be quick to judge. Be generous in your assessment of students or fellow classmates, for many have unseen struggles that impact their academic life.

I hear: Nurses, doctors and healthcare workers today saying, “we’re exhausted, what more could we do?” Don’t forget your own needs as you seek to care for the needs of others. For even the God of compassion, knew the value of Sabbath rest.

I hear: Office workers and those working remotely today asking: “what should we do?” Don’t disrespect your direct reports, coworkers, or bosses, treat them with dignity, ask questions when you don’t know and assist others, share workloads and lightening the burdens of another.

I hear: Retirees and empty nesters today ask: “what should we do?” Pour into the lives of the generations coming after you, invest and seek to know children like they are your own, so that they may experience the unconditional love of God.

We all have a part to play, for as we have been transformed from within, we are called to transform the world around us, *building a home for all*. Making the inner change, externally visible. We may literally be clothing the naked, and feeding the hungry, but elevating the voices of those often ignored, speaking truth to power, protecting, and empowering the vulnerable as also consistent with John’s directive to “Produce Fruit”.

And yet don’t be fooled, for in this precision, in this clarity of purpose, there is still messiness and worlds of nuance, and such a lot to learn and to unlearn. Our world is complex, as are people’s lives, everything is connected, and one issue or problem intersects with a hundred more. But do not be discouraged for you do not do this alone. Everyone has a part to play in *building a home for all.* A place where everyone can belong, can be seen, heard, and valued.

**Candle of JOY**

And what joy, can be found in such a place. One of the writers of our series said it this way, “Collective belonging gives way for collective joy– joy that is free and full.” Isn’t that beautiful?!

The same invitation that John extended to those who were seeking to be baptized, to participate in an external sign of an inner change, extends to us.

Live in such a way that strives for justice and peace and respects the dignity of every human being. Produce that fruit and build a home for all!

And in creating those spaces of belonging, spaces of love and community…God’s promise is that you will experience joy! It doesn’t get much clearer than that, Amen.