

Christ is Risen!! Now What?  
Luke 3:7a, 8-14  
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Rev. Nancy F. Dolan  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

I hope you are still riding the Easter wave; the joy of that day. The music here was spectacular. The sanctuary, beautiful. But mostly, I hope staying with you is the stunning witness of Jesus' passion, played out over Holy Week, climaxing in God bringing forth life out of death. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.

Many of you told me that Easter was exactly what you needed. Whether it's the winter that won't lose its grip, or the personal challenges so many of us in the midst of, or just the pace of life the way it is today. You needed, and I needed, this pause of pure joy; a time to take in the extent of God's love for us. We needed the *full experience of the cross* – from the laying of our palms on Palm Sunday when we realized that we likely also would have abandoned Jesus, to the ultimate betrayal of Good Friday that was punctuated by the slamming of the tomb, and finally to the release of utter joy on Easter morning. We need it all, and especially we need the new life of Easter day.

So what now? What do we do with what we just witnessed? How do we respond to a love like *that*?

I've been thinking a lot about this. For some reason this year I felt more compelled than ever not to just enjoy, but to *respond*. I'm wanting to be changed by this miracle, and by the extravagance of the grace and love of God poured out for us on the cross. In fact, I'm *expecting* change, in me and in you – in all of us. Because if that kind of suffering, done willfully for us, and that kind of power and love - God conquering death, literally raising the dead – if that doesn't change us, what would? If God overcoming the worst evil humans can inflict upon each other, if that doesn't compel us to action, to be changed, then Jesus' death was in vain. And I cannot stomach that.

So how *will* we let our lives be changed by Easter? How will we respond to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? The apostle Paul asked the Romans in Chapter 6, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into

Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him...so that just as Christ was raised...we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3,4). *In newness of life*. Is your life new today after the experience of Easter? Or, was Easter morning, the empty tomb, merely a feel-good day set to fabulous music, and then we're back to our routines, unaffected? Unchanged? I'm challenged to think about that.

In our Scripture lesson this morning, we find John the Baptist also talking about lives changed; in this case to prepare the way for Jesus and demonstrate allegiance to God. John is preaching to crowds who have come to be baptized. John tells them they have to change their lives. That their lives should bear good fruit. Eugene Peterson in the *The Message* translates this scene with the questions, "Is your life green and blossoming? Or is it deadwood?"

The crowd around John is perplexed by this. After all, their inclusion as the people of God has been determined by their bloodline to Abraham. Similarly, one could observe Christian practices today and argue that our inclusion as people of God is determined by our attendance at church. But, John challenges this crowd, pointing out that God is able to include *anyone* in the fold, insiders and outsiders. Instead of relying on your bloodline, he says, change your life. So the people wonder, "What should we *do*?" Like we are wondering today, on the heels of Easter.

There are many ways John could have answered this question. He could have told them to worship God more frequently; or to pray four times of day, or make sure your committee meets monthly and submits copious minutes.

When you think of all the ways John could have answered, it's noteworthy what he *does* say. John's first response to the question, "What should we do?" is focused on the other. If you have two coats, you must share, he says. You have what you need, do not take any more than you should from others. The change that John points to when asked, "What do we *do*?", first and only, is about providing for your neighbor.

This year at First Pres, we have been focusing on our core practice of CONNECT. Core practices are behaviors that help us grow as followers of Christ, to grow more Christ-like. These practices, identified from those of the early church, enable us to fulfill our mission of sending well-equipped disciples into the world. They are spiritual disciplines that help shape us into God's image. To focus on the CONNECT practice this year, we started with CONNECT with each other in the fall; CONNECT to God, or God with us, during Advent; and we just wrapped up CONNECT to self through Lent, as we explored who we are in God's eyes.

Now, we shift our focus outward: CONNECT with our neighbors. The timing seems perfect, as we try to respond to the Easter miracle. When asked, "What do we do?", John didn't begin a sermon series on ethics, or doctrine. He talked about sharing with your neighbor. Later, when Jesus was asked, "Are you the Messiah?" he didn't remind them about his bloodline, how he was descended from David as Scripture predicted. Seems like that would have been convincing. He didn't point to any credentials - fabulous preaching or impressive knowledge of the law. He didn't even mention (and surely I would

have pointed this out) about his own baptism when the dove descended and God spoke, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased." No, when asked if he was the Messiah, *Jesus pointed out what he had done for his neighbor* – "the blind received sight, the lame walked, leprosy was cured, the deaf received hearing, and good news was preached to the poor" (Luke 7:22-23); all the things that Jesus was appointed to do, as Isaiah prophesized: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18). Jesus came to bring newness of life now, not only in eternity, but today. He did that by being in relationship with the other, by tending to the needs of his neighbor. Our faithful response, walking in Jesus' footsteps, is to do the same.

CONNECT with our neighbors. I like the term "connect" because to connect we have to come together. We have to be in relationship with one another, to get to know each other. There is so much in our world that pulls us apart. We are becoming more alienated from each other.

If we are to tend to the needs of our neighbors, we have to *connect* to them, we have to know our neighbors. Which means, we have to risk relationship. This requires vulnerability, doesn't it? Risk. It requires compassion, and it requires obedience undergirded with trust and openness that whatever we bring, God will use it. Listen again to that of what's required to connect to our neighbors: Vulnerability. Risk. Compassion. Obedience. Trust. In other words, what we witnessed in the life and in the death of Jesus. If we are to follow this Jesus, if we are to go "where our Savior trod," as we

sung in our opening hymn, we are to do the same. We are to put ourselves out there for our neighbor, risking and trusting, so that *all* might experience this newness of life that Christ ushered in, and died for.

So, how will you be vulnerable during this season of CONNECT with our neighbors? We have to practice – they're called core practices for a reason! During the course of this Eastertide season, ending with Pentecost, we will be exploring some of the practices of connecting with our neighbors, learning from the life of Jesus. Each week we will have a challenge or practice to pursue. Every one of us comes from a different level of comfort connecting with your neighbors. I encourage you to stretch yourself from where you are.

But, who *is* your neighbor? Maybe we should define that. The secular definition of neighbor is the person next door, whoever lives near you. That's certainly a place to start because today we often don't know our neighbors, or know their needs. My own neighbor struggled with cancer for 9 months before we even knew. I was so ashamed. So yes, the neighbor you are called to connect to could be the person right next door. When Jesus talks of neighbor, it could be anyone God has put before you; anyone you come across, even someone mentioned in a conversation. Warning: Your neighbor is often someone very different from you.

Where might you begin? First, begin by trusting that you have something to share, and someone else has something you need. We are in need of one another; God created us that way. Sometimes we need a coat, sometimes we have a coat to share. Sometimes, like the tax collectors listening to John, we

have more than we need financially, and sometimes we need more. And some of us have power, like the soldiers, and others need power. All of us have the love of Jesus Christ in our hearts. This world certainly needs that.

After you realize you have something to share, and someone else has something to share with you, you begin noticing who God has put in your path, and try to connect to that person. *Noticing* our neighbor is our first step. We can't connect if we don't notice. And, we can't know who needs a coat, or our power, or God's love, unless we get to know them. Sometimes it starts as simply as "hello." A simple hello connects us. In that word, we recognize each other. We notice. Whatever your starting point, I urge you to stretch yourself, to be vulnerable and trust that God will use your connection in transformative ways for both of you.

That's your challenge and mine as begin this season of connect and open ourselves to the new life we have been raised to in Christ. Let's put ourselves out there to connect with our neighbors and see what new life springs forth. May God bless our efforts. Amen.