

Peter Bankson: Just Do It!

Seekers Church

A Christian Community

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Summary

It's the Christmas shopping season, a special time in our civil religion when spending money and getting things has replaced waiting for the coming of Jesus. We have turned the season of Advent into a season of Acquisition. Into this complexity walks John, with some guidance for our faith journey: "Repent!" Feel your failings, acknowledge your sin, decide to do something different!" But then, as now, the devil is in the details. John offers three dimensions for us to consider as we prepare for the coming of Christ:

- new perceptions,
- radical commitment,
- complex journey.

If I thought I was on this journey alone, I'd never have the courage to start, but, by the Grace of God, I am not alone.

Scripture (Luke 3:7-18)

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 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 stoned to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe 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 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."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Introduction

It's time for a lesson on God's call. It's the Christmas shopping season, a special time in our civil religion when spending money and getting things has replaced waiting for the coming of Jesus. We have turned the season of Advent into a season of Acquisition. It's a time when we are confronted once again by the contradictions in our lives. It's a time when many Seekers feel challenged by our faith and our culture with a dialog between the two raging on the inside.

"Just do it!" The slogan belongs to an athletic equipment company. As far as I know, they've registered it as a "service mark" of the company so no one else can use it in advertising: "Just do it!" It's a good slogan for the American consumer market, especially during the holiday season. It pushes our buttons for simplicity, decisiveness and action. The

advertisements say: "Just do it!" The voice inside replies: "Just do what?" Then the voice of the culture says: "Do the right thing – buy these shoes!" And the inner voice says, "OK, here's my VISA number," and according to the cultural rules, we're ready to be happy again.

But for those of us on a spiritual journey, life is more complex. Somehow, these simple slogans and automatic responses don't work quite as well. Around here, it goes more like this: The advertisements say: "Just do it!" The voice inside replies: "Just do what?" Then the voice of the culture says: "Do the right thing – buy these shoes!" And the inner voice says: "Do I need new shoes? Where were these shoes made? How much did the laborers who made them get paid? Do I really need new shoes? If I buy THESE particular shoes, what kind of a message will I be sending about my values, or my affluence, or my insensitivity to global economic inequity or the environment – and what ABOUT the environment? Just how much pollution was generated making these shoes?" The inner dialog goes on: "But, I like them, and they look comfortable, and my old shoes are worn enough to need replacing but still good enough to give to the Salvation Army..."

And there I stand, with the shoes and the decision in my hands, and the dialog continuing in my head. And then I buy the shoes, or I don't, and the decision is behind me – but the dialog continues, Do, do, do...Ponder, ponder, ponder...

Somehow, even when we try really hard to "do the right thing," life gets in the way. Into this complexity walks John, with some guidance for our faith journey: "Repent!" Feel your failings, acknowledge your sin, decide to do something different!" But then, as now, the devil is in the details.

At first reading, it might seem like the only change that might be needed is to adopt a new set of guidelines: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." If you are a tax collector,

“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” If you are a soldier, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” And if you are neither of those, rest assured there are many gurus of the day who will give you comparable rules, whatever kind of person you are. (Have you been to a good bookstore lately, and looked at the “self-help” section?)

Unfortunately, it isn't that simple. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is coming into his ministry, and John has been given a glimpse of what that will mean for the people of his day. Don't count on your lineage or your history to save you. If you would be saved you must act as though you have repented. He calls those who come to him to a life of loving and doing God's will: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

How might we make sense of John's guidance today? It seems to me that there are three dimensions for us to consider in John's guidance to the seekers of his day: perception, commitment, and complexity— in the context of community

Perception

First, there are new perceptions of our experience that can clarify God's call on our life. Research on perception has shown that we only become conscious of about 10% of the stimuli that reach our sensory organs. We have, in our minds, some powerful structures that help us know things. But where we do not have the mental models, the stimuli don't have any place to stick, and they go in one ear and out the other. We've all heard about the way different witnesses see the same event differently. Perception changes when we are willing and equipped to grasp what comes at us.

In the Gospel lesson, when John challenged those who came to him not to count on their lineage from Abraham to protect them, he was challenging an old perception, hoping to open up

a new way of seeing the spiritual journey – the way that Jesus is coming to proclaim. It will take a new perception to receive the ministry of Jesus as Good News.

This week, Diane and Rachel and Covey are leaving for Vietnam. There, Diane will complete the formal legal process to adopt Nguyen Thi Tu. In a month, Covey will have a baby sister living with him, and Diane and Rachel will be sharing their home and their love with a girl whom they have yet to meet. Their decision to adopt a child from Vietnam came as part of a long process, part of Diane and Rachel's spiritual journey. They did not begin with the goal of adopting a baby girl from Vietnam.

The idea of adopting a young child from another culture is a rather uncommon idea. You don't hear many people at the mall responding to the question: "What will you be doing for Christmas this year?" with the answer: "Why, we're going to Vietnam to adopt a baby daughter!"

But we know Emily's grandson Dima, and John Carlos Bayer, and Jennifer Schaeffgen. Sounds like the Gospel to me: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." The dominant culture expects this kind of love from every biological parent, but this is a deeper commitment.

Where are your perceptions being broadened, and how does that happen? Most often for me, old perceptions are challenged when disagreements arise with people I respect. Since I don't like disagreements, the process itself is a challenge. Often I can get a little piece of something new through reflection or writing. My spiritual director, Deborah, can help me see what has been invisible, and separate mirage from reality.

Is there a place where you can turn for help in finding new perceptions? Often that happens in a class in the School of Christian Living, or in a mission group, or in a spiritual

mentoring relationship. If you'd like to find or develop a relationship within Seekers that can help you see with fresh eyes, let me know, or speak with Sonya or Kate. We'll be glad to help.

Commitment

The second lesson from this week's Gospel is this: the radical commitment to follow Christ will change our life. John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. I think it takes radical commitment to live a life that will bear that kind of fruit.

Diane and Rachel have responded to a new vision with a radical commitment. Their whole life will be changed by the arrival of Nguyen Thi Tu. I know that they are excited about the future. And, I know some of their fears and concerns. But the fact is they are going ahead with this, even though they might have some concerns. At the core they are committed to a new life, with a daughter in their family. Radical commitment is commitment at the root, where the axe is laid. It won't be easy. It may not always be fun. But will be joyful and life changing.

There are other, less committed ways to respond to new perceptions, but they may not deepen your call. Recently, Marjory and I have been revisiting the writings of Joe Dominguez and his colleagues at the New Road Map Foundation. This group out of Seattle has developed a process that can help you achieve "financial independence," so that you are not tied to a job to meet your financial needs. I'm convinced that the process works. I've read stories of families that have followed the process and been able to quit their jobs. I know several households in Seekers that are benefiting from working with this model. I even helped Phoebe Girard teach a class on this approach in the School of Christian Living many years ago. But the fact is I haven't been doing the practice. However, so far I haven't had the deep commitment, the radical

commitment it takes to follow through on something as new to me as the financial independence method of the New Road Map Foundation. I'm not sure why. I'm just beginning to get some new perceptions in this area. We've decided to work the process beginning in January. I'm sure I will learn some interesting things about myself as I take on this new discipline.

Is there some element of your spiritual journey where you've stepped back from the radical commitment God has called you to? How might we support you in making – and fulfilling that commitment? Let your spiritual director know, and if the next step for you is to find a spiritual director, let me know, or speak with Sonya or Kate.

Complex Journey

The third dimension I see in the Gospel for this week is this: God calls us to a journey that will be complex beyond imagination. It comes as no surprise that the result of a new perception energized by radical commitment might be a complex life. The trip to Vietnam that Diane and Rachel and Covey will begin on Thursday is complex. I know. I've been there – more than once. But the direction their life journey is taking is much more complex than the trip itself.

God must love complexity. Look at the universe, or the solar system, or the ecosystem, or the nation, or the community, or the family, or the back of your neighbor's head. What incomprehensible complexity! And God loves the whole of it! But we, with our limited imaginations, have trouble when things get too complex. That's where we need community.

How do you handle the complexity in your life? I know from many of you how important it is to have other people in the community who can share in your journey and be supportive. Part of the amazing promise God makes to people of faith is to be present, even in the midst of terrifying complexity. The

other scripture readings for this week reinforce this mystical dimension of the good news. In Zephaniah the prophet says: "Sing aloud, O Daughter of Zion... the Lord, your God, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more."

Advent is a season of waiting for the coming of Christ. It is a time for us to gather strength to look for new perceptions, make deeper commitments and stay present in the midst of complexity.

Community: Where the Journey Takes Place

I'm convinced that for a Christian commitment means community. Diane and Rachel and Covey are not alone. Their commitment is surrounded and supported by all of us. Of course there are solo commitments, but I know from experience that they are MUCH harder to keep. The dominant system is too strong for most of us to stand against without help. That is the strength of groups like AA. That is the secret of mission group life. And it is at the core of our call as a church: to be a place where we can support one another as we live our God's call in the structures where we live our lives, family, work and community.

The Good News is hard news if we have to respond to it alone – but we don't. Each of us is called by God to a particular task – standing for justice, confronting greed, nurturing family or community, advocating for the poor – God's creation is complex enough to have a place for all of those and more. We have chosen to be on this spiritual journey with each other, and that is cause for celebration.

Conclusion

I think the message of John, calling seekers to acts "worthy of repentance," goes well beyond adopting a new set of guidelines, or reading another self-help book, or finding a new guru. For me, John brings three lessons about what it

takes to be ready for the coming of Christ:

- We must open ourselves to new perceptions and clarify God's call on our life.
- The radical commitment to follow Christ will change our life.
- The journey will be complex beyond imagination.

I want to close with a quote from Phyllis McGinley. Deborah Sokolove shared it with the Celebration Circle this week: It describes "saints," but it might include all of God's people, including us: "The wonderful thing about Saints is that they were human. They lost their tempers, scolded God, were egotistical or testy or impatient in their turns, made mistakes and regretted them. Still they went on doggedly blundering toward heaven."

If I thought I was on this journey alone, I'd never have the courage to start, but, by the Grace of God, I am not alone. The shoe guys say: "Just do it!" But fortunately, "IT" is not as simple as they think. Amen.