

“Action Plan”  
Luke 3:7-18

The last three weeks we have heard much about one of our American cultural icons: Tiger Woods. The media has been obsessed about finding out all the dirty details of his affairs, drug usage, and marital troubles. Everyone seems to be interested in this scandal. Even ads that had Tiger Woods in them have been pulled off the air because Tiger’s moral character has come into question. This all seems so legitimate. But in all the condemning of Tiger is no one seems to be upset about whether he shares his wealth with others or not. Moral character has been reduced to the way one behaves in their intimate relationships. When was the last time we heard of scandal about people who refuse to share with others or about people who refuse to help those in need?

Somehow even our Christian faith has been reduced to issues dealing with human sexuality or personal salvation. Even though Jesus spent little to no time on these issues, we are often pushed to believe that these are the most important issues of faith. In an article in the *Christian Century*, William Willimon notes that, “Unfortunately, we have psychologized the gospel, turned it into a feeling, transformed the Kingdom of God into a mood. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that the Messiah whom we await is the great cosmic affirmer of everything we hold dear and of all our illusions.” How about this real scandal? Americans spent about \$440 billion for Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hanukah in 2005. This amount was almost \$200 billion more than all charitable giving. Americans surveyed this year indicated that they planned on average to spend nearly \$1,000 per person for Christmas. In 2001, Americans spent about \$6.4 billion on holiday decorations, lights and trees. By contrast, global spending on HIV/AIDS was only \$6.1 billion in 2004. But somehow these scandals go unnoticed in our world. In fact, most of the time, they are celebrated as signs of a healthy economy. What is often not reported is the fact that all this spending and greed is not making us any happier. In article entitled, *Real Wealth: Redefining Abundance in an Era of Limits*, Sarah Van Gelder writes that, “The United States is among the wealthiest countries in the world, and yet it is filled with people, rich and poor, who are anxious about their future and who feel that they don’t have enough.”

The words of John the Baptist come to us as good news today. In a world that is often built on greed and manipulation, John offers us a different way to live. John invites us to repent, to change our minds and to be open to the work of the kingdom of God. John confronted the powers and principalities of his day: the Roman Empire, the immoral rulers of his region, and the corrupt religious leadership of the temple in Jerusalem. In fact, his ministry was conducted outside the halls of power in the wilderness so that he could be detached from the values of corruption in his day. His words were not gentle because he wanted the people listening to him to pay attention to the grave situation in which they were living.

What is amazing is that John’s call to repentance and change was something that the people liked and welcomed in their lives. In fact they wanted to know what to do. “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’” (3:10-14).

John responds with specific suggestions, with an action plan which has three steps. First step is being compassionate and caring about the poor (share coats, share food). The second step is to be ethical and just in their daily dealings (don't collect more money than prescribed). The third step is not to lust for wealth (be satisfied with your wages). What John is interested in is justice and equality, practically acted out. It is also interesting to note that the people who ask John the questions are not well-known for their high moral standards. Tax collectors were Jews appointed by Rome to collect the taxes, but they could name their own price, pay the taxes out of what they had collected and legally keep the remainder for themselves. It was rare in those days to hear of an honest tax collector. Soldiers also used their position to intimidate people and to accept bribes. Both professions provided an ideal way to become wealthy at the expense of the people.

But even those people who seemed hopeless because they lived by the corrupt standards of greed and empire, the good news reached them and transformed them to people who were caring and compassionate. This is such an incredible message of hope and joy for us today. In a book called, *The Home We Build Together*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks talks about the importance of having some common moral commitments in a society for the health of that society and its people. With our diversity in terms of cultures, religions and politics, it is hard to find common ground for social responsibility. Sacks uses the image of a hotel saying that we tend to live in our communities as we are living in a hotel where what matters is only my room and there is no sense of community. What Sacks challenges us to do is to create communities together in the same way we may build a home, where all of us are invested in the making and the upkeep of our home. This model he believes can transform our societies from communities of complaint and rights to communities of compassion and responsibility. "Rights depend on law, responsibility on culture. But without responsibility, rights are a cheque on an empty account, a song on an iPod whose battery is dead. On 10 December 1948 the United Nations made its momentous Declaration of Human Rights. Yet human rights abuses have not visibly diminished since. That is why the Bible is more concerned with cultivating habits of responsibility than merely prescribing rights. Rights are legislated by states. Responsibility is created by society. You cannot have one without the other. A system of rights must be accompanied by a culture of responsibility."

The call of John the Baptist for creating communities of responsibility was so powerful in his time because the government was beyond redemption, yet all was not lost because the people had the power to live differently, to live by the values of the kingdom of God. This call is so important for us today as we can see that the government cannot legislate compassion, care and honesty. This is the story we see all over the world. As we see that our government is sending more troops to Afghanistan, whether we support the decision or not, we must ask, "Is there enough social responsibility built at the same time as the Constitution?" According to Oxfam International, Afghanistan is hovering on the brink of a humanitarian disaster because of hunger, disease and poverty. Their studies show that poverty is the core cause of most of the people's problems in Afghanistan.

Even though the words of John seemed to be harsh, the reaction of the people listening was dramatic. They are transformed by listening to ask, "What can we do?" The message of God's love sounds like an easy thing to receive. Yet, transformation of our hearts, the healing of our souls can be the hardest task we can ever undertake. Learning to let go of our basic instincts for survival to trust and practice the ways of God's love is the work of a life-time. It calls us from expecting things for ourselves to seeing our responsibilities toward others. Living in the kingdom

of God is not about a reality that is not possible in this life. It is about living with the presence and values of God right here and right now.

The Church of the Savior is an ecumenical church in Washington, D.C., rooted in the Protestant tradition. Though most members appear to be living comfortable enough professional lives, they believe that Christian commitment requires a “cultural conversion,” and that a practice of church that does not include commitment to the poor is “heretical.” Thus they have placed certain practices at the core of their common life, adopting them as disciplines required for membership: They covenant with God and each other to spend one hour a day in prayer, meditation, and devotional reading; to worship with their gathered community once a week; to participate in a mission group that is responsive to the claims of the poor; and to tithe their gross income as a basis for “proportional” sharing of their livelihood.

The story is told about a man named Joe. Joe worked as a bagger at the local grocery store for nearly 7 years. Joe, age 25, has Down’s syndrome. He worked quietly and carefully, placing groceries in bags and thanking customers for coming to shop. A bagger is not a particularly prestigious job, but Joe didn’t see it that way. He enjoyed serving. The manager of the store gathered together the employees for a sales pep talk. Joe, as a good employee, attended and listened intently. The manager encouraged all of the employees to take ownership and creativity in the grocery store and for each come up with an idea that would encourage and support their customers. Joe left the store in search of an idea. He went home and talked to his father about putting an inspirational cartoon or quote in the customers’ bags as they left the store. Joe chose a quote and his father helped him copy and cut the quote into slips of paper so Joe could add them to the bags with the groceries. The next day at work Joe quietly slipped his thought for the day into the bags and passed them to the customers. It made Joe happy, and his customers, too. A couple of weeks later the manager of the grocery store was alarmed to see a line of 20 people in the lane where Joe was bagging. He opened up multiple lanes for people to move to. He was surprised when people wanted to remain in Joe’s lane to receive his inspirational quotes. One woman told the manager that she comes in every day to pick up something just to get Joe’s quote. Joe’s quiet kind service turned a mundane job and shopping experience into one of community and care.

That was Joe’s action plan as part of living in the kingdom of God. What is your kingdom plan of action? Amen.