

Sermon 12 7&8 19

I recently saw a doormat. I'd like one for every doorway into our church! "Come In. We are Awesome."

Yes, we are.

Many thanks to everyone here, especially the men of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew. When everything was totaled up after the wonderful luncheon they made for us last week, all of you folks gave \$3,500 to Camden Christmas! And you know what? It wasn't just about the money, or even the great food - it was about the great fellowship that was enjoyed by everyone here! Thank you God! And thank you all! And we're just gettin' started!

On this, the second Sunday of Advent, we hear about John the Baptist in our Gospel reading. What a curious, wonderful character John was — supposedly Jesus' cousin. I am most struck, however, by what he said about Jesus and himself. "He must increase, but I must decrease." How many public figures can you imagine genuinely saying that?

So I decided, since we are baptizing little Charles Leon Cerveny today, that I would share the bulk of this sermon with the writer and theologian Frederick Buechner. This is what he had to say about John the Baptist.

"John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did

his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage-sale people wouldn't have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time.

The Kingdom was coming all right, he said, but if you thought it was going to be a pink tea, you'd better think again. If you didn't shape up, God would give you the ax like an elm with the blight or toss you into the incinerator like chaff. He said being a Jew wouldn't get you any more points than being a Hottentot, and one of his favorite ways of addressing his congregation was to call them a snake pit.

Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had. Some people thought he was Elijah come back from the grave, and some others thought he was the Messiah, but John would have none of either. "I'm the one yelling himself blue in the face in the wilderness," he said, quoting Isaiah. "I'm the one trying to knock some sense into your heads." (Matthew 3:3).

One day who should show up but Jesus. John knew who he was in a second. "You're the one who should be baptizing me," he said (Matthew 3:14), but Jesus insisted, and so they waded out into the Jordan together, and it was John who did the honors.

John apparently had second thoughts about Jesus later on, however, and it's no great wonder. Where John preached grim

justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late.

Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company to the WCTU, the Stewardship Committee, and the World Council of Churches rolled into one. Where John baptized, Jesus healed.

Finally John decided to settle the thing once and for all and sent a couple of his disciples to put it to Jesus straight. "John wants to know if you're the One we've been waiting for or whether we should cool our heels a while longer," they said (Luke 7:20), and Jesus said, "You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. Tell him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of deadbeats are living it up

for the first time in their lives. And three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging" (Luke 7:22-23).

When they asked Jesus what he thought about John, he said, "They don't come any better, but when the Big Party Up There really gets off the ground, even John will look like small potatoes by comparison" (Luke 7:28).

Nobody knows how John reacted when his disciples came back with Jesus' message, but maybe he remembered how he had felt that day when he'd first seen Jesus heading toward him through the tall grass along the riverbank and how his heart had skipped a beat when he heard himself say, "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world" (John 1:29), and maybe after he remembered all that and put it together with what they'd told him about the deadbeats and the aluminum walkers, he decided he must have been right the first time.

(Carl) Frederick Buechner)

Just as John welcomed Jesus the man, let us welcome Jesus the child.