

“What Should We Do?” (12Dec21)
Luke 3:7-18; Philippians 4:4-7

“What should we do?” Maybe that question from the Gospel reading grabs you the way it did me.

With it, here’s part of what I read for our staff devotions this week on St. Nicholas day: “The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor. You do wrong to everyone you could help but fail to help.”

That’s from St. Basil the Great, an important theologian of the 4th Century. I like the notion of it, but not necessarily the implications. I do try to consider the coats I have in my closet when I hear about Afghan refugees facing their first Wisconsin winter. Once I made my dad give away an extra pair of boots because they spent most of the winter in a closet while the homeless guys downtown would use them all day every day. But I’m not good at getting rid of all my extras; heck, I’ve got ten pairs of Chuck Taylors alone.

“What should we do?” This repeated line in the Gospel reading can function to reinforce a guilty feeling of not doing enough. I’m not up to the heroic standard of giving away all my extra food and coats and shoes and money.

For those feelings of not doing what we should do, it’s worth pointing out the reading’s translation; instead of “What should we do,” it could also be “What will we bear” or maybe even something like “what now?” How do we do what God wants?

John the Baptist’s list doesn’t suggest praying for hours a day or leaving everything to go to seminary. Rather, it involves pretty reasonable behavior within people’s lives, as Don also mentioned. He doesn’t tell hated tax collectors to stop collecting taxes for the empire; he just says don’t skim off the top. He doesn’t tell soldiers to give up violence (though I wish he would’ve), but instead tells them not to twist arms to squeeze coins out of people. He does, indeed, talk about sharing clothes with those who need it—and rather than coats, this is actually the term for undergarments—

the soft clothes closer to the skin that people would generally only have two of—one for weekdays and one for the sabbath. So he suggests sharing underwear, if there’s need.

Overall, this seems fairly easy and congruent, not a heroic exertion of saintly magnanimity. It’s just continuing in daily life. That fits their question, which is essentially: we’ve been baptized, so what now? That’s where the phrase “What will we bear” comes in. John has been talking about bearing fruit and, as Martin Luther loved to remind us, trees don’t decide what sort of fruit to bear. Nor does it make any sense to wag fingers and lecture trees about the fruit they should bear. They do it naturally. A good tree will bear good fruit. So how do you get to be a good tree? God has named and claimed you as one in baptism. You’ll inevitably bear good fruit.

That brings us more helpfully to the question for you: what will you bear? What are your fruits? What now? How is this faith lived out in your life, and for what purposes?

You think of me probably most as a pastor, but for yesterday my faith’s fruit was mainly in scooping litter boxes and walking a dog and feeding the birds, plus of course making some supper and doing the dishes, those basic things of caring. And it’s in bike repairs so I can keep pedaling through the bad weather. Or maybe I could point to olive wood carvings for sale, as a way I try to help Palestinian people who have very little livelihood and great need. I certainly don’t want that to sound special or heroic; it just comes naturally, and with joy. It’s fruit.

To look at it a different way, the Awaken Dane clergy cohort met on Thursday, and as I came in the question for the group was where we see the Holy Spirit moving. I had just learned that Sonja would be concluding her service as an MCC pastor, so my answer was about the Spirit moving in and for her, and leading us to the future and the road ahead as MCC.

But a couple others had maybe more natural, fruitful answers. One described how her father has been in the hospital, and she was arguing for his care when they were going to let him die. She

found major medical errors in his charts, and it was also pointed out that health care is part of ever-present systemic racial injustice, so her father needed an advocate. Another person shared about an argument she'd been having with her father, and how the Spirit was moving in a word of forgiveness.

This also fits with the Ministry Wherever We Are writings we've received from some of our MCC siblings. There have been great stories of joy in community connection and volunteering and organizations that help. Two of my favorites were different: Kathy Henning described ministry to bugs, and Corkey Custer told how his faith leads him not to honk his horn at stoplights. It makes me think also of Confirmation students, sharing faithfully about how they are striving forward with education during the pandemic and wanting to be caring friends.

I don't know: Maybe some of you will volunteer for those in need and strive to stop oppression. You might empty your cupboards and increase your charitable contributions and even share your underwear. Others of you might just not cheat at work, try to buy right Christmas gifts, offer or receive forgiveness, plant prairie seeds, and occasionally lay off on the horn, and even enjoy it. What will you bear? What now?

I'll invite you to turn to somebody and name what occurs to you, where you experience this joy. Because it expands all of our vision about how God is working among and through us and leads us all to rejoice, I dare you to scan the QR code and sign up to write a simple reflection about it. It's not what you should do. It's just what you might do, even joyfully. Go ahead and chat for a minute.