

Last week I mentioned to you that, after John had called them children of snakes, these people whom he insulted actually wanted to hear what he had to say even more. This week we get to what he told them to do, and I have to say, it's actually pretty simple. John is actually rather more realistic than Jesus will be when he gets the same question. Here's what he says in a nutshell: "if you have extra, share with those who don't have enough, and if your job gives you power, don't abuse it." Underlying this teaching is the idea, which may seem rather foreign to us in this age, that there is such a thing as enough.

Enough is an important word, I'm pretty sure I've preached about it before. It's a word that we understand perhaps even less than we do "repent." Some people like to label these teachings of John and the similar teachings of Jesus as being communist, or socialist. Which I don't think is actually true, but I'm also fairly certain they aren't capitalist. Capitalism only has one concept of enough: a market equilibrium, which doesn't make any concession for morality or justice, only the principles of supply and demand. The thing is though, John and Jesus are not communist, capitalist or socialist. They are something much more radical than any of those things. Those are all labels about systems of economic principles, a communist believes that everything should be shared and the division of goods should always be determined by the good of the masses and the masses themselves should somehow magically determine how that works. A socialist believes that things should be shared according to what the government thinks is best for the masses, it's a realistic compromise to try and get around the fact that the proletariat is not always able to make good decisions for itself. Capitalism relies on a sort of mystical belief in the free market as the way to distribute goods and services.

All three of them share one assumption though: resources are limited, and therefore decisions about allocation of those resources must be made by some system. Each system has some strengths and weaknesses, but they share the assumption that there will not be enough. They also assume human self interest (what we might call sin) is going to get in the way of truly equitable distribution. They try to counteract that with some form of power, either the will of the proletariat, the power of a benevolent state or the workings of the market. None of them really work, because Mammon is inherently greedy, and whatever force you seek to apply to negate that greed usually ends up making it stronger and more perverse.

John's suggestions to the people about what they should do are beautiful and they would probably work out pretty well... if we ever got the gumption to actually try them. The first injunction: if you have extra, give your extra to someone who doesn't have enough. I read a thing on the interweb this week that said that Jeff Bezos (Amazon) could give all of his 639,000 employees over \$200k each and still have over a billion dollars. We have more vacant homes in this country than we do homeless people. The developing crisis of late stage capitalism is that some have more than any sane person would actually say is enough, and increasing numbers of people do not have anything like enough. It is not because there isn't enough to go around either, at least not yet. Nobody in this room is probably in the category of having way too much, and most of us are definitely in the category of people who give to those who don't have enough. But wait there's more to come.

The tax collectors were coming to be baptized. These were not popular folk in the community, they were seen as traitors by many, and they were notoriously corrupt. When they asked, "what should we do?" the answer on many people's tongues was probably, "Take a long walk off a short pier." But John simply says, don't take more than you have to, in other words, don't cheat people, don't gouge hem, just take what you need, again the concept of enough is rather important.

Finally we get to the soldiers, people whose power comes from violence, whose job it is to keep the peace by force if necessary. As with the tax collectors soldiers were quite well known for abusing their position and their power. Surely they're going to get left out of the kingdom, surely they cannot be a part of this thing that John is doing, but sure enough they can. Again, it is similar to what he told the tax collectors, "just do your duty," don't take it further than that.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about these teachings though is that no one is left out. The examples of tax collectors and soldiers showed that no one would be disqualified based on their identity. No matter what your station in life, you were capable of acting in line with the standards of God's Kingdom. That is a radical proposition to be sure, no wonder it got both John and Jesus into trouble. John's truth resonated with the people, it seemed hopeful, it seemed fair, it seemed like they might actually be able to live that way. We have not yet gotten to the really good part either, the good news is that these behaviors are actually founded on a rather audacious assumption: economic reality isn't really real. The assumption of limited resources is not only false, but destructive.

John's prescriptions were the best you could do in a world of scarce, limited resources, but Jesus was coming to bring something that is completely non-economical. The Spirit is fire, fire grows the more you feed it. Jesus was going to come into the world and turn the whole supposition of limits upside down. Jesus challenges our ideas of economy at their core. The Spirit amplifies when it is given away. If you have the Spirit burning in you, it cannot and should not be contained, it should be poured out.

John was pointing towards this reality when he challenged people to live justly and generously inside the illusion of the world of scarcity. Live like there is enough. Live like the reality of the Spirit is the reality of all things, because it is. That is the good news of the Gospel, that even if you give up your very life, you will gain life in Christ. This kingdom of Heaven that John was preparing for, and Jesus was bringing with him, is not at all like what we would expect. We can't really expect it, because everything we know has limits and there is a real competition for what is available within those limits. This is why we compete for our tribes, our nations, even our ideology. What the Kingdom of Heaven implies is that we need to re-examine our allegiance to those things, because they are essentially idols, they are the things that we must lay down in order to follow Jesus, they are the things we must allow to die before we take up eternal life.

John's teaching essentially says that you can, as indeed you must, go on doing certain things within the realm of the world. He does not prescribe laying aside everything, as he himself had done, but he tells people, in any circumstance, to learn to live justly and ethically, basically by not taking more than their share, by doing what is required in order to exist, but not trying to force more than you need out of the world. If you want true abundance that does not come by oppressing others, you must enter the Kingdom of Heaven, if you want real justice and everlasting life, you must enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Survive in this world, and thrive through the life of the Spirit, that is what we must do.