

First Trinity Lutheran Church  
Third Sunday in Advent  
Luke 3: 7-18

### **Embracing Others in Need Can be Transforming**

Each year at the Knoll household we celebrate St Nicholas Day. St Nicholas was born during the third century in the village of Patara. Today it is known as southern coast of Turkey. His wealthy parents raised him to be a devout Christian, but they died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Obeying Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man. Bishop Nicholas became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships. As part of that celebration, we give gifts, and this year I received a banana. More about my gift of the banana later. But let's think about Christmas gifts in general.

“What did you get for Christmas?” That may be the most-asked question during the days immediately following Christmas – “what did you get?” Little children especially like to talk about what they got – “I got this, and I got that.” I remember when I was in grade school – at recess time – my friends would crowd around as we showed each other what we got for Christmas. We would even bring our Christmas gifts to school for show-and-tell – that way; everyone could see what we got.

This isn't just a “kid-thing.” Adults like to talk about what they “got” for Christmas too. We cannot help but be excited when we get things. We love to get things. We might try to act calm and cool and collected on the outside as we open

our gifts, but deep down, many of us are doing somersaults in our hearts, because we just love getting things for Christmas.

A question that is rarely asked after Christmas is over is this – “what did you give for Christmas? I don’t want to know what you got – I want to know - what did you give?” Have you ever asked someone that question? What did you give for Christmas? I bet if you did that, you would catch someone completely off guard. Although it doesn’t seem like a proper question in that you run the chance of making someone feel uncomfortable, you might want to try it this year and see what happens. By nature, we’d rather talk about what we got – that’s more about me, what I have – as human beings we tend to be more focused on getting things than we are on giving things.

In the desert around the Jordan River, there lived a man who wanted people to change their attitudes toward their life and their possessions. John the Baptist was that man, teaching the people to repent. Remember, as Pastor Wendy told us in her children's talk last week, to repent means to jump down, turn around, to change direction in your life. John was preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah. The Bible describes how crowds of people would come out to see him – he was such an unusual sight – a man living out in the desert, dressed in a robe made out of camel’s hair, eating grasshoppers and wild honey. And his message was so different from what the people were used to hearing – he was telling the people to change, to repent.

As the crowds came out to see John, God revealed something to John about these people. Many of them really weren’t all that sincere. They were materialistic people – their god was money, possessions. Many of them weren’t

interested in changing their lives and preparing for the Messiah. John was a tourist attraction to them, and that's about it. That's why, in verse 7, John calls them a "brood of vipers." In verse 8, John told them to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." Don't just stand there, John told them. If you really are sincere, if you really are repenting in your life, then change, do something that people can see. Time was running out, John told the people. In verse 9 he said, "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Jesus called John the greatest of all the prophets. And his words speak to us today. In many ways, we are like those people who came out to see John. We struggle with materialism too – don't we? The Christmas season can really bring it out of us, more so than the other seasons of the year. Christmas is that time of the year when we focus on "getting things" – "What did you get? Look at what I got!" Yes, we know that the Bible says that we should change – be more spiritual – but as Americans, we like to focus on material things. Today, John the Baptist calls out to and asks us hard questions. For example, if we know what is right – why do we keep on doing what is wrong?

That's what John the Baptist was addressing many years ago. He pointed out the people's sins. But then he pointed the people to the Savior when he told the people in verse 16: "One more powerful than I will come..." – he was talking, of course, about Christ. Do you know what made Jesus "more powerful" than John the Baptist? I supposed you could point to the fact that Jesus performed powerful miracles, and John didn't. But something else made Jesus more powerful – Jesus was able to do two things that John couldn't do.

First – Jesus was able to take away our sins. Do we feel guilty about the sins we have committed in our life? All the times we have been materialistic? All the times we have been so focused on getting, that we forgot about giving? Do we feel guilty about all those times we have heard the Word of God, but then went home and slipped back into your old ways? Jesus is able to do something that John couldn't do – Jesus is able to take our guilt away. He takes our guilt away by giving us something – he gives us his life, as a sacrifice on the cross for us. He gives us his righteousness, and takes away our sin. He gives us forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life.

And there's something else Jesus gives us, and that is strength to change. When the people in the crowd listened to John the Baptist, they wanted to change. They wanted to stop being people who were focused on getting. "What should we do then?" the people asked in verse 10. And then, John gave them practical ways that they could change – look at verse 11 – John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Share, John told the people. Change your focus from getting, to giving.

Tax collectors were struck by John's message. They repented. They were forgiven. "Teacher," they asked John, "what should we do?" John told them to be honest – "Don't collect any more than you are required to." Tax collectors were famous for taking more than they needed to. They were very focused on getting. John told them to become more honest in their dealings with other.

What changed those people in the desert? As they listened to John, they felt guilt because of materialism. But they also felt joy, because of the Savior who

was coming, who would take all of their sins away. These people – even tax collectors and soldiers – changed their focus from getting to giving. And they changed in real, practical ways that others could see in their lives.

I am sure someone this year will ask you, “What did you get for Christmas?” and then, it is your job to relate to them all the material things you received from other people. But this Christmas, as you think of what you got, think of the gifts God has given to you. It’s hard to wrap God’s gifts – they really don’t fit underneath the tree. But think about them – a Savior, who has taken away all our sins. Think about that forgiveness that is ours in Christ. Think about the sure hope of eternal life. None of these gifts seem very impressive to those who live in the world around us. They don’t work very well for show-and-tell in school. But these spiritual gifts that God has given to you are the greatest gifts of them all.

It is my prayer that these gifts will change you. Instead of someone who is focused on getting, by the grace of God, you’ll change, be transformed if you will, into someone who is focused on giving. If we focus on giving, if we focus on other rather than ourselves we will be changed.

Remember the banana I told you I received for St. Nicholas day? The banana was over-ripe to put it mildly. I didn’t eat it right away. What if you receive a gift that you don’t like or can’t use? Just throw it away? But rather than throwing it away can it be used in a different way? An overripe banana can be transformed into delicious banana bread.

That’s pretty neat. Something not seen as desirable can and in many cases is transformed into something useful. Our lives can also be transformed. What’s

on your Christmas list this year? I have a new idea for a list – make a list, not of the things you want to get for yourself, but instead, make a list of things you want to give. A Christmas giving list – here are all the ways- all the things; I want to give this year. As John the Baptist said, let the one who has extra – give to the one who has nothing. We can be transformed by looking for opportunities to give at Christmas and all year.

Remember, you have a God, who gives and gives and gives to you. Let us worship him, this Christmas by changing our focus from getting to giving. And by changing our focus from getting to giving we will be transformed. Amen