

{A sermon preached jointly by Barbara Lundblad (L) and Herbert Chilstrom (C)}

Augustana Heritage Association

Christ Chapel; Gustavus Adolphus College; St. Peter MN.

June 24, 2012

The Day of John the Baptist

Luke 1: 57-67

C: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Lundblad steps into the pulpit and stands beside Chilstrom)

C: “Whoa! What are you doing here? Don’t you know that the Bible says women should be silent in the church? Imagine, Barbara, if some of the old pillars of the Augustana Synod were sitting here in the front pew! What would T.N. Hasselquist and Erick Norelius say? And P.O. Bersell?

Before you answer, let me reply. I think, were they living today, and had they experienced the impact of what women have done in ministry the past forty years, all of them, as well as Oscar Benson and Malvin Lundeen, would say, “Women are a gift to the church. They belong in our pulpits as much as men.” And, of course, Emmy Evald, who had been a pain in the neck to several of those men, would be standing here singing the Halleluiah Chorus! In fact, were she alive today, I think Emmy might well be our next presiding bishop!

L: She would be terrific, Herb! And if anyone ever questioned women's ordination, she'd probably point them to this first chapter of Luke. Who are the bearers of Good News? Two women -- Elizabeth and Mary.

C: You're absolutely right, Barbara. So why don't you preach it?

[At that point C steps out of the pulpit.]

L: Actually, Mary isn't part of today's reading – but she is surely part of Elizabeth's story. The connection between these two women came earlier in this chapter when Mary rushed off to see her cousin. The angel Gabriel had just told Mary that she would bear a child who would be “son of the Most High” – and added a footnote: your cousin Elizabeth is six months pregnant. Well if Elizabeth really was pregnant, maybe Mary hadn't been dreaming. So she rushed off to see her cousin. “She entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.” That's a rather strange construction – like saying “I entered Herb's house and greet Corinne!” Was Luke reminding us that this was Zechariah's house even though he had been silenced by the angel? We can't read Luke's mind, but he doesn't want us to forget: this is Zechariah's house.

As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting she said the Rosary! “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” But what sign had she received for such bold proclamation? Elizabeth is the only person in this chapter who wasn't visited by an angel. She claimed a different revelation: “As soon as I heard your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” But what sort of sign is that? Arland Hultgren may remind us that Luke also said she was filled with the Holy Spirit – and you know how it is: we usually separate Spirit from flesh, Spirit from body, surely Spirit from womb! But, as Luke tells the

story, flesh and Spirit are connected here: “Elizabeth’s body was teaching her theological truths.”ⁱ Even without an angel, Elizabeth greeted Mary as “mother of my Lord.” This was the first confession of faith in Luke’s gospel.ⁱⁱ

Mary stayed with Elizabeth three months and then she went home. Who knows why she didn’t wait for Elizabeth’s baby to be born? We’ll never know – but we do know that everybody else was very excited about this baby! The neighbors and relatives gathered for the rite of circumcision and naming. Many brought hot dishes and some were carrying little robes they had made with the letter Z embroidered on the pocket. “Surely he will be named Zechariah, after his father,” they said. “Yes, after waiting all this time -- and the two of them not getting any younger!”

“No, said Elizabeth, “he is to be called John.”

“None of your relatives has this name!” they protested. Don’t you respect our customs and traditions? Do you know better than the boy’s father? Did you forget that this is Zechariah’s house? *“But none of your relatives has this name!”* Women have heard variations on those words for centuries. *“But none of Christ’s disciples were women!”...”* *But God created men and women with distinct roles” – men can vote, and women can’t!* Twice the Augustana Synod denied women the right to vote until passing a resolution in 1907 to permit the practice. It’s unclear how many congregations actually amended their constitutions to allow women to vote. 1907 seems like ancient history, but women were not permitted to be trustees in congregations until 1951. I’m sure many of us in this sanctuary were alive then!

“None of your relatives has this name.” The neighbors just couldn’t believe Elizabeth. They kept motioning to Zechariah – after all, it was his house! He asked for a writing tablet and wrote: “HIS NAME IS ---- JOHN.” All of them were amazed, except Elizabeth. She simply smiled – and so did Emmy Ewald centuries later. What faith and fortitude it took for her to start the Women’s Missionary Society in 1892. Since women couldn’t vote, she had to ask men to propose the resolution at the synod meeting. It’s hard to exaggerate the influence of the Women’s Missionary Society whose 57,000 members raised over \$2.9 million for missions. In *The Augustana Story*, Maria Erling and Mark Granquist remind us that in the 1910’s and 20’s the WMS had a larger annual budget than the synod itself! Emmy Ewald believed that women were called to do God’s work – she knew the church wasn’t only Zechariah’s house! She must have loved this story of feisty Elizabeth. Surely Elizabeth must have taught her son John a radically expansive vision of the kingdom of God. Remember, Herb? When religious leaders claimed the importance of bloodline and heritage, John told them that God could raise up children of promise from the very stones by the river.

(HC steps into the pulpit.)

C: Is there any question that Elizabeth had a profound impact on her remarkable son John? In today’s Gospel text the people who saw the unusual events that accompanied his circumcision asked what would become of this boy John. We know and can jump forward to his public ministry. His clear call was for repentance. But we seldom stop to reflect on what happened when his listeners asked, “What must we do?” How did John respond? Listen again:

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none...”

“Whoever has food must do likewise...”

To the tax collectors he said:

“Collect no more than the amount prescribed....”

To Roman soldiers John said,

“Don’t extort money and don’t accuse falsely....”

What do we have here? Two things: Stewardship and Justice.

Stewardship. I can almost see Sam Edwins standing over there with his broad smile. Next to him is Martin Carlson with his signature grin and that twinkle in his eye. Both are saying, “Well, it’s about time you Augustana folks got around to highlighting stewardship! It was so important to the Augustana Synod.”

Yes, and I’m also thinking about another voice from the past -- Harold Floreen. After he graduated from Augustana Seminary he settled into a long ministry of teaching biblical studies at our Lutheran seminary at Saskatoon in Canada. When he retired Harold and his wife moved here to St. Peter and became our good friends. One day Harold and I were discussing stewardship. He pointed out something to me that I had completely missed. “Herb, have you noticed,” Harold said, “that almost every time Jesus called someone to live in a close relationship with him, he talked about their possessions?” Suddenly I saw it.

When Jesus called his disciples they had to part with possessions and business interests.

He said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

“Give, and it will be given to you. The measure you give will be the measure you receive.”

And it runs on and on through the Gospels.

As some of you know, I’ve accented tithing for my entire ministry as pastor and bishop. No, not to earn points, but simply as a proper expression of our gratitude for what God has done.

A week ago in Rock Island at a synod assembly I met a man who reminded me of the “Mission 90” video tapes I prepared at the beginning of the life of the ELCA 25 years ago. He mentioned the one on stewardship and tithing. He reported that he and his wife had thought about tithing for years. But that video pulled them across the line. They started and now after 25 years have found it one of the most gratifying experiences of their lives.

How about you? Maybe you're waiting until you get a bit older. Our president Don Sjoberg suggested two days ago that we look younger than we did two years ago. I thought to myself that I may have low vision, but Don needs a white cane! If you could see yourselves as I do from up here you'd know what I mean when I say, "Most of you aren't going to get much older!"

I suggest you start now or that you increase your generosity. You will soon experience what that couple in Illinois discovered. And you'll learn what Harold Floreen meant when he said that there's a very close link between what we give and the quality of our relationship with Christ.

The second element in John's preaching is justice.

Several years ago I went back to look at the minutes from the 1958 Augustana convention at Jamestown, NY. It was the year of my ordination. Listen to what the Augustana Church said in one resolution after another:

First, pastors were told to "mix in politics" ...to assess political and social trends in the light of the Word of God;

Second, congregations were reminded that to exclude any person on the basis of "color, culture, class or caste" would be a sin...;

Third, the church was called on to eliminate discrimination in "housing, employment, education and access to social welfare services";

Fourth, the convention condemned "appalling corruption" in trade unionism and business management.

Wow! Augustana was very solid theologically, to be certain, but had a radical social agenda. I think John the Baptist would have fit in very nicely.

John wasn't afraid to "mix in politics." Tax collectors were completely enmeshed in the system, often buying their positions and overcharging the poor and powerless. And soldiers were and are always an extension of the government. Both tax collectors and soldiers had power on their side. But John says, "No! Power is not the answer. Only God has ultimate power. And God's power is the power of compassion and justice for all."

But what of today? Were he walking the earth today, what would John say?

John would surely point a finger of judgment at the huge and growing gap between the rich and the poor in the world. And no place on earth is it more glaring than in the United States. It's a fact that there is more concentration of wealth in the hands of a small minority today than at any time since 1929. And we know what happened then.

Everyone seems to agree that greed and poor judgment lie at the heart of our financial crisis. Our senators and representatives in Washington bailed out many of the thieves, telling us they were “too big to fail.” Yet, after more than four years, the perpetrators go unpunished.

Where are your voices? I’ve been writing letters to my senators and congressman. If I keep it up, like John, I could lose my head one of these days!

Yes, for all of us to “mix in politics” would be the Augustana spirit.

Well, Barbara, I’m getting so wound up that it’s hard to wind down. You’d better come and help me wrap up this sermon.

L: You’re beginning to sound like John the Baptist yourself, Herb! If Elizabeth heard you, she’d say “Amen!” We need all three voices – Elizabeth, Mary and John -- to hear the fullness of God’s story. We need Emmy Ewald and all those men you named at the beginning.

C: Yes. I think of how John said that God is able to raise up sons and daughters for the kingdom from the stones on the Jordan Valley floor. Maybe the sons and daughters of Augustana can be among them.

L: God always has a way of surprising us. That’s not a threat – that’s a promise. Let’s close with that beautiful prayer that often followed an Augustana sermon:

Praised be the Lord, and blessed forever. Who by His Word has comforted, taught, exhorted and admonished us. May the Holy Spirit confirm the Word in our hearts, that we be not forgetful hearers, but daily increase in faith, hope, love and patience unto the end, and obtain salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord

L & C: And let the people say, “Amen!”

i

ii