

Today at the 10:00 a.m. service we will be commemorating St. John the Baptist. We are hosting the local lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, whose custom it is to attend church together on the Sunday closest to the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, also called "St. John's Day." In the Gospel lesson for that service, John's father, the priest Zechariah (who had been rendered mute before John's birth), utters a prophecy on the day John is circumcised. He says to his infant son:

You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of
death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Luke, the writer of the Gospel, then concludes, "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel."

In our Gospel at this [our early] service, we encounter Jesus, John's cousin and Lord, the one for whom John was the forerunner, as Jesus encounters a variety of people who offer to follow him ... after taking care of other business. Again, our Gospel writer is Luke:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

These two stories from Luke's Gospel speak to us about what is central and what is not.

Today in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, and indeed in nearly all mainline Christian denominations, we are engaged (as we have always been) in a discussion about what is central to the Christian faith ... what is core doctrine and what is not?

Some centuries ago, someone in the church laid down the maxim, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity." This has been attributed variously to St. Augustine, to John Wesley the founder of Methodism, to John Amos Comenius the founder of the Moravian Church, and to Peter Mederlein a 16th Century Lutheran theologian. I don't really know who first said it, but it's a good rule to follow. The problem is in determining what is central to religion, what is essential, and what (on the other hand) is peripheral or non-essential.

Today's Gospel stories, whether of John the forerunner or Jesus his cousin and Lord, are guides for us in considering that question.

John was the son of a priest for whom one would have thought the religious establishment was central and essential. As Luke tells us, he "grew and became strong in the spirit." As the son of a priest, it would have been expected that he would become a priest - the priesthood in Ancient Judaism was hereditary. Like his father, he would be expected to learn the rituals and to take his regular place in the rotation of priests serving in the sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple, to be at the very center of power in the Jewish religion. Instead, he retreated into "the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel."

In the religious world of John's and Jesus's day there were two important and powerful groups of Jewish leaders, both of whom are mentioned in the Gospels: The Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were a priestly group, Aaronites, associated with the leadership of the Temple in Jerusalem; they claimed descent from Zadok, the high priest who had anointed King Solomon. Their approach to religion focused primarily on properly performing the Temple rites; they emphasized that portion of the Law of Moses which dealt with sacrificial ritual and did not believe in an afterlife. Most importantly, they rejected the so-called "Oral Torah" or "Talmud", which concerned the daily life of Jews and which was revered by the Pharisees. For the Sadducees the center of power and authority, the Temple and its rituals

was all important. John was, by birth, a Sadducee but he rejected all of that.

The Pharisees, in contrast to the Sadducees, embraced and emphasized the “Oral Torah” and its many and detailed rules for daily life, and they did believe in a resurrection and an afterlife. The Pharisees are the ancestors of today’s Rabbinic Jews with their rules of “keeping kosher.” The Pharisees believed that all Jews in their ordinary life, and not just the Temple priesthood or Jews visiting the Temple, should observe rules and rituals concerning home life, purification, and family relationships. For them, the center of religious power and authority was the Synagogue where the everyday Jew was taught to obey, and where they the Pharisees enforced, the rules of daily living

Jesus the Rabbi was probably a Pharisee, or at least more sympathetic to their understanding of religion than that of the Sadducees. Nonetheless, in the encounters between Jesus and the three persons who want to follow him in the regular lectionary Gospel today, we find Jesus rejecting precisely these things: he has no “home life” (for unlike a bird or a fox, he has no home!); he has no concern for purity (“let the dead bury the dead”); and he couldn’t care less about family relationships (turning back to bid a parent farewell renders one unworthy of following him). Just as John, who would blaze his trail, rejected his Saddusaic heritage and its concept of the center of religious life, Jesus rejects his Pharisaic origins and its understanding of the core of religion.

Or were they? Were they rejecting their roots entirely or were they instead rejecting those peripheral things which those traditions had wrongly placed in the center of the Jewish faith? Were they instead rejecting the non-essentials with which others had covered over and obscured the essential? The non-essentials, whether ritual temple sacrifice or *kosher* laws of daily life, were central to the power structures of the day, but not to religion as John and Jesus saw it.

The Sadducees had put Temple ritual and sacrificial system at the center of their version of the Jewish faith. John rejected all of that. When the Sadducees and the Pharisees came out to see what he was doing at the Jordan River, he called them both a “brood of vipers” and admonished them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

“The answer to sin,” he said, “is not offering some animal on the Temple altar! The answer to sin is repentance, turning back toward God! Having a contrite heart and washing here in the Jordan is more effective than any Temple sacrifice.”

“Repent!” he said, because “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

That One, his cousin Jesus, also encountered the Sadducees and the Pharisees together. On one occasion the Sadducees put to him a rather silly question about the afterlife, imagining a woman who had seven husbands: Whose wife would she be in the here-after? Jesus dealt

handily with that question and was then asked by a Pharisee, "What is the greatest commandment?"

Most folks understand that question to mean "Which of the Ten Commandments is most important?" or "Which of the many many rules of daily living in the Talmud is most important?" I believe that Pharisee was asking something very different. I believe he was asking, "Is the Saddusaic emphasis on the Laws of ritual sacrifice and Temple rite the central core of our religion, or is the Pharisaic emphasis on living a pure and holy daily life with all its minute rules at the core of our faith?"

And Jesus answered in a way that made it quite clear that he and his cousin John were right on the same track. "Neither," was his answer.

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

God was his answer, as it had been John's answer and as it should be our answer.

The essential core of our faith is love of God and those whom God loves. About that we are and must be united! Everything else, temple rituals, religious rites, rules of daily living and purity of conduct, questions of whether to use vestments or not, what color they should be if we do, who can be ordained or not, who can be married or not, whether to use candles or not, whether to have music, and if we do

whether it can be accompanied by musical instruments, and all the other things we debate ... those are peripheral, the non-essential. With regard to those we can disagree and we must give each other the liberty to differ. And in all things we can and must treat one another with charity and good will. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law with regard to such things."

In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."
Amen.