

*“Get the Road Ready”*

Sharon Rhodes-Wickett explained it happened “At the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Sierra Leone, West Africa. The meetings were held in the large sanctuary in the capital city, Freetown.” She continued, “Each day as we entered the large doors into the sanctuary there was a young girl, maybe about the age of 8, who begged at the door. She looked ragged, dirty, her hair was matted and knotty, and she had on tattered clothes. No one seemed to know her, and people brushed her aside upon entering. Some of the pastors tried to tell her to go away. We were busy doing the work of the church. She was a bother. This went on for several days.

As I sat in the pew observing the Conference one day, my peripheral vision caught some motion outside. I looked out the window, and there on the patio, outside the sanctuary was a woman, a lay member of the conference. She found a bucket and some soap. Although dressed in a beautiful traditional tie-dye gown, she pushed up her sleeves, and she was giving that 8-year-old girl a bath. She soaped up her hair and was tenderly making her all clean and new. She washed the clothes the child had been wearing, and they were spread out on the bushes in the sun drying. The woman went out and got another dress for her to wear, too.

Hundreds of pastors and devoted laypersons poured into the Methodist Church of Freetown to do the work of the church. But outside, on the edges, quietly and without notice, the work of redemption - the work of Jesus Christ was being done. It was not the work of committees and reports and programs. It was the work of soap and water and human touch and being able to see the face of Jesus in that of an abandoned 8-year-old girl.” (Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, *Collapsing the Distance between Heaven and Earth*)

As members of the Church – the Community of Believers – the Body of Christ, Jesus’ work – our work is to also minister to those in need and to proclaim through our deeds and our words the Good News of God’s Agape Love made manifest in Jesus Christ. In Luke 1:67 we are told, “***John’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he spoke God’s message***”. After beautifully declaring how God was doing wonderful things for the people of Israel in fulfillment of the Divine Parent’s promises, such as providing “a mighty Savior”, Zechariah went on to prophetically speak to his newborn son, John, who would become the Baptizer. Those words were used in our Call To Worship today. Zechariah said to his infant son in **Luke 1:76-77**, “***You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his road for him, to tell his people that they will be saved by having their sins forgiven.***” Sharing the Good News of our sins being forgiven because of God’s Love for us is also the message Round Grove United Church, UCC seeks to share with everyone in need of God’s healing, forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation – radical hospitality.

The Gospel Lectionary Reading gives part of the preaching of John the Baptist in **verses 2b-3**, “***At that time the Word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. So John went throughout the whole territory of the Jordan River, preaching, ‘Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins.’***” The Synoptic Gospels portrayed John’s words and actions as indicating how the people would be forgiven. Those reports of the Synoptic Gospels accurately reveal John’s approach to his tasks or calling. Evidently, he believed God required the repentance of people before they would be acceptable for the receiving of forgiveness. He baptized the Repentant to indicate their repentance and their readiness to be forgiven by the soon to be revealed Messiah.

However, it seems to me, at least, that the Baptizer did not fully understand his purpose in the mighty thing God was doing. Looking at the second half of what John’s father had spoken to him as a newborn, Zechariah put the emphasis on the process differently than his son eventually sought to manifest. Zechariah said in **verses 78-79**, “***Our God is Merciful and Tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace.***” John’s task was to prepare the people – to get the road ready for them – for them to anticipate and perceive the soon to be revealed Messiah, so they and all people would be forgiven! It would be God’s “Merciful and Tender” Work

on behalf of the Jews and all persons living in our dark and broken world. Through the Messiah, God would “guide our steps into the path of peace.” John’s calling through his father’s prophecy was not to prepare the people to receive forgiveness by getting them to repent and be baptized. Instead, John was to prepare the people to understand God, through the soon to be revealed Messiah, would bring them forgiveness by God’s Mighty Act of Grace. John’s Baptism still had value because (pause) it became a way for people to consciously declare their trust in God’s Promise of the Messiah and their Desire to benefit from the promised Forgiveness of God.

The Synoptic Gospels’ authors seem to have had a better understanding of John’s purpose than did the Baptizer for **Luke states in 3:4-6, “As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah: ‘Someone is shouting in the desert: ‘Get the road ready for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel! Every valley must be filled up, every hill and mountain leveled off. The winding roads must be made straight, and the rough paths made smooth. The whole human race will see God’s salvation!’”** It is not just those who repent and are baptized that “will see God’s salvation” but “The whole human race”! Demanding repentance might not have been the most effective way to lead people to be open to welcoming the Messiah and his Good News of everyone being forgiven by God.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke indicated John did not completely understand his role in nor what God was doing. Specifically, they explained John was perplexed by Jesus and his ministry. For after the Baptizer was put in prison, he sent messengers to Jesus to ask him, if he was the Messiah. **The Baptist in Luke 7:19, “sent them to the Lord to ask him, ‘Are you the one John said was going to come, or should we expect someone else?’”** When they asked Jesus John’s question, Luke explained in **verses 21-23, “At that very time Jesus healed many people from their sicknesses, diseases, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many blind people. He answered John’s messengers, ‘Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf can hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. How happy are those who have no doubts about me!’”**

After recalling the ministry of John the Baptist and his father’s prophecy, what is our calling – our response? Certainly, we do not face the same difficulties and oppression the Jews experienced during the ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus. We are very fortunate to live in the United States of America with our freedoms and quality of life. However, people today face many hardships – we still have illnesses; there is poverty in our society; we struggle to provide food, clothing, transportation, and shelter for our families and ourselves; there are the temptations to commit crime, violence, terrorism and plenty of reasons for some to be afraid; there is racism, sexism, and all sorts of prejudice in our society; there are broken relationships and the constant struggle to live out authentic relationships; there are emotional and psychological struggles; there is the death of strangers, acquaintances, neighbors, friends, loved ones, and ultimately of ourselves; and there is the quest for meaning, purpose, and God. **So, like the people during the time of the ministry of John the Baptist, there are many reasons for us to need radical hospitality, healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, God’s Agape Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love, and New Life.**

Jesus said, “How happy are those who have no doubts about me!” **Important for our happiness – our getting the road ready for Jesus Christ and seeing “God’s Salvation” is to trust our Divine Parent’s Agape Love for us and the truth Jesus Christ is God’s Son and the Ultimate Embodiment of God’s Agape Love.** Further, focus through our Advent Worship Celebrations and during our daily prayer on the awesome nature of God’s Agape Love for us as was shown in the Birth; Life; Ministry of Healing, Teaching, and Radical Hospitality; Suffering; Death; and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Be open to the Holy Spirit inspiring you and us to live the New Life in Jesus Christ. **Share the Good News of God’s Agape Love – of Radical Hospitality and Reconciliation with all who experience rejection and/or are unloved.** Amen.