

Advent 3C

Luke 3:7-18

13 December 2009

Christ Church

My Dad liked to farm for a hobby. How he did it I'll never know. He was the junior partner in a family business, and he had seven children. Yet every day after work, and on his day off, he would take to the outdoors.

There were several open fields around our home which Dad planted in corn, wheat, or soybeans. Since he bought the farm from his mother's estate, he inherited all the farm equipment as well. Among the many implements was a big red combine, vintage 1940s.

When I was a little girl, that combine reminded me of a monster in a horror movie. But as I got older, I came to appreciate it as a marvel of the industrial revolution. At harvest time, Dad would pull the combine out of the barn with the tractor to tune it up. I seldom

heard my Dad use bad words – *except* when he was working on the combine. Of course I was his little tag-a-long, so I learned the expressive power of certain words while watching him work on the machinery.

But, of all my memories of the combine, the days of harvest are the fondest. My Dad would enlist my brothers and all my cousins in the neighborhood to help. One of them would drive the tractor pulling the combine, one would drive the tractor and trailer that hauled the wheat to the barn, and the others would help pick up the bags of grain.

My Dad, who would sit on the bench of the combine, allowed me to sit there with him and “help out.” We would hold the bags while the grain poured from the chutes. Then we would quickly tie them up and push them down another chute and out on to the ground so that the boys in the trailer could pick them up to take back to the granary.

Of course, when we're young we take things for granted. It amazes me now to think of the many things I and my siblings and cousins learned from that experience. We learned team work; we learned the value and satisfaction one gets from physical labor; we learned about nature – growing seasons, crop rotation, and the joy of the harvest.

I can still picture the tiny forks of the combine hovering just above the ground, cutting the wheat stalks. The motion of the machine would draw them up into the body of the combine and eventually the grain would cascade into the bags. The chaff would fall from the back of the combine to the ground where it became compost for future crops.

Of course, in the days of John the Baptist, whom we read this morning, there were no combines. The wheat would be cut by hand and shaken in the wind (thus, the word, "winnowing"). We can

imagine that this method of sorting through the chaff to get to the grain must have been a tedious process.

John uses the harvest of grain to describe the ministry of Jesus. The process sounds harsh: a Baptism of wind and fire, the winnowing fork, the burning of the chaff with unquenchable fire. When we hear these words, we assume that the unquenchable fire is the none other than the fires of hell.

But, Jesus may have meant something else entirely. What if the unquenchable fire is the love of Christ – a powerful and purifying force that burns from humanity all that is useless, all that is harmful, all that blocks our access to the Holy Other, God Almighty, our ultimate home?

John the Baptizer must know something of that unquenchable fire of love. He speaks passionately and relentlessly about it – and the love is so great that John says things to people that are likely to get

him into a heap of trouble. But an unquenchable fire *cannot* be stopped. It cannot be contained.

When John's followers ask him, "What should we do?" he speaks very specifically. To the privileged of Israel, he says, If you have two coats, share with someone who has none. If you have food, share it with those who have none. If you collect taxes, do it ethically and fairly – not taking more than what is coming to you. If you are a general, avoid dirty politics. In other words, be a reflection of the generous love of God.

Today, our Global Outreach Forum will be helping refugees from Bhutan settle into a new home. It's been inspiring to watch the exchange of emails: researching the diet of the Bhutanese, volunteering to purchase bed linens and groceries, and taking the supplies to this vulnerable family. This is what John the Baptist is talking about. The joy and satisfaction in giving to these refugees is unquenchable: much more so than any present we might find under

the tree this year. As Jesus knows, the act of giving is, in and of itself, a powerful, purifying force.

As we decorate and prepare for the wonderful celebration of Christ's birth, we are also acutely aware of the fallout that most of us are feeling from the fall of the economy over this past year. I received a letter from Rainbow Village that reports an increase of assistance to the poor by 40%. At the same time, donations have been dropping. And, some of the folks who are asking for help these days look a whole lot like you and me.

It would be so easy just to sit in the comfort of our homes and thank God for our good fortune. But John the Baptist would have us do otherwise. Advantage, place of privilege, and economic security, are not what saves us in the end.

If we are to become fit for the Presence of God, we must take up the lessons of love that John prescribes. Those lessons can be a

**winnowing fork in our lives, scattering our chaff and finding the
kernels of goodness in us.**

As John knew, this makes for a harvest of abundance.