

(PP1) Matthew 3:1-12

“Wild John and Homeless Jesus”

Accepting Jesus. In many churches, acceptance of Jesus is the key to salvation. We accept him by placing faith and trust in him, and acknowledging that he is Lord and Savior.

You can go online and find step-by-step instructions for accepting Jesus as your Savior. These steps usually include a line from the tenth chapter of the Book of Romans which says, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

You can also go online and find ten excuses for *not* accepting Jesus as Savior. What *cannot* be found online is a good reason to reject a new sculpture of Jesus, one that shows him as homeless – a poor man sleeping on a bench. But that's exactly what two North American churches have done: Refused to accept the homeless Jesus.

Artist Timothy Schmalz created this sculpture, which reminds us that Jesus identifies with the poor. The sculpture is a person, who is shrouded by a blanket, looking remarkably similar to the homeless who lie on benches and grates across our continent. Only when you look carefully do you see that the man has gaping wounds in his feet. It's Jesus – *Jesus the Homeless*.

Two prominent churches in Toronto and New York City have rejected the sculpture, and it is now displayed outside a Jesuit school of theology in Toronto. “Homeless Jesus had no home,” says the artist. “How ironic.”

Although the Bible tells us that the real Jesus had “nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58), many of us don't want to accept his homelessness.

We cannot imagine the Messiah lying under a blanket on a park bench. We assume that God wants his followers to be healthy and wealthy. Some of us even blame the poor around us for not having enough faith. If pushed, we might invite a homeless Jesus into our heart. But honestly, most of us would still have trouble inviting him into our *home*.

Our Scripture lesson is about John the Baptist, not Jesus the homeless, (PP2) and yet, the two cousins seem similar. In the third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, John thunders away, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near” (v. 2). Predicted by the prophet Isaiah, John is the voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming! Clear the road for him!’”(v. 3).

Matthew tells us that John wears “clothing woven from coarse camel hair with a leather belt around his waist.” And he “eats locusts and wild honey (v. 4) while screaming insults at the religious leaders, calling them a ‘brood of snakes’.”(v. 7).

“Jesus the homeless” seems harmless, lying quietly under a blanket on a park bench. But Wild John? He sounds like a deranged street-person, one who shouts at passersby on sidewalks. What are we supposed to do with Wild John and homeless Jesus? What would it mean to really *accept them?*

(PP3)For starters, *we need to let God be God.* Perhaps that term is overused, but letting God be God includes accepting that God will raise up leaders that are different than the people we might naturally follow. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, not in a church pulpit, or on a television sound stage. He proclaims, “Repent,” which means “change your mind or purpose” – not something that most of us want to naturally do. Wild John is not a leader whom we normally might follow.

When *Forbes* magazine listed the top ten qualities of a great leader, it included a number of features that John certainly displays: Honesty, communication, confidence, commitment, creativity, intuition, and the ability to inspire. However, John misses some key qualities as well: the ability to delegate, a positive attitude, and a sense of humor. I have never heard anybody say, “That John the Baptist – he’s hilarious!”

If we're going to let God be God, we need to accept that God may raise up a different kind of leader. John is the prophet who speaks God's word clearly, calling people to repent, or, to turn away from sin, and to turn toward Christ – “for the kingdom of heaven is near” (v. 2). John is the critic who can call religious leaders to match their deeds to their words, challenging them to “prove by the way they live that they have repented of their sins and have turned to God.” (v. 8).

With this kind of honesty, communication, confidence and commitment, Wild John really doesn't need a sense of humor. He needs the ability to confront people. (PP4) *Wild John reminds us of the value of “crucial confrontation.”* Most of us will naturally struggle with this, because we don't like to be confronted.

However, to “confront” is to “hold someone accountable, face to face, to right something that is wrong.” When confrontations are handled correctly, both parties talk openly and honestly. Problems are solved and relationships benefit.

John the Baptist and Jesus the homeless both knew that the people of Judea had broken their promises. They violated God's expectations, and engaged in all kinds of bad behavior. They desperately needed to confess their sins and receive forgiveness. And so, John offered them a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His “crucial

confrontation” is to call them to repent – to turn away from sin and toward Jesus.

John's confrontation with the religious leaders is even a bit more pointed. “You brood of snakes!” he shouts to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. “Who warned you to flee God’s coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have turned from sin and turned to God!” (v. 7-8). John accused them of “talking the talk,” but not “walking the walk.” Unless they actually turned and walked in the way of God, he wasn't going to accept that they took his baptism of repentance seriously.

And, the fact that they had Abraham as their ancestor wasn't going to help them either. John insisted, “That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones.” Their family tree was going to have to “bear good fruit” if it wanted to avoid being chopped up, and thrown into the fire (vv. 9-10).

Can we accept this kind of confrontation? Can we accept that our words are largely meaningless, unless they are backed up by deeds? Can we accept that a family tree cannot hold us up, unless it bears good fruit?

(PP5) Finally, God also uses *Wild John to point us toward homeless Jesus*, the one who baptizes “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 11). At this point in the story, Jesus is still under wraps, like the shrouded statue called *Jesus the Homeless*. But soon, Jesus will be revealed, and we will be challenged to accept him.

“I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God,” John says, “But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

John sees himself as subordinate to Jesus, as we all should. As powerful as John's baptism is, it is designed to turn people away from sin and toward Jesus Christ. Jesus “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire,” predicts Wild John. “He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn, but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.” (vv. 11-12).

The baptism of Jesus is a new kind of cleansing, one that replaces water with “The HOLY SPIRIT and fire.” Such a baptism eliminates impurities, much as a blazing fire purifies metal, and it fills people with the Holy Spirit of God. John is saying, “If you think the cold water of my baptism is a shock, just wait for the Spirit and fire being brought by Jesus.”

(PP6) Wild John and homeless Jesus can be difficult to accept. Their appearances are strange, their messages are shocking, and they identify with the poor of the world. But both of them provide us with a crucial confrontation, one that can change our lives forever. Our challenge is to respond with acceptance, rather than with silence or violence.

John confronts us with a message of repentance. Turn away from sin and toward Jesus Christ; produce good fruit and prepare for Jesus' baptism of Holy Spirit and fire. You know, this invitation from John and Jesus may be the most crucial confrontation we ever face. It's one that can change forever the way we handle problems and relate to God and the people around us.

Wild John and homeless Jesus are waiting for our response. May God bless you all, Amen.

Sermon Notes

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- Acceptance of Jesus is the key to salvation. We accept him by placing faith and trust in him, and acknowledging that he is Lord and Savior.
- Although the Bible tells us that the real Jesus had “nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58), many of us don't want to accept his homelessness.
- Our text is about John the Baptist, not Jesus the homeless. Yet, the two cousins seem similar.
- “Jesus the homeless” seems harmless, lying quietly under a blanket on a park bench. But Wild John? He sounds like a deranged street-person, one who shouts at passersby on sidewalks.
- What are we supposed to do with Wild John and homeless Jesus? What would it mean to really *accept them*?
- Letting God be God includes accepting that God will raise up leaders that are different than the people we might naturally follow.
- Wild John *reminds us of the value of “crucial confrontation.”*
- To “confront” is to “hold someone accountable, face to face, to right something that is wrong.” When confrontations are handled correctly, both parties talk openly and honestly. Problems are solved and relationships benefit.
- Can we accept this kind of confrontation? Can we accept that our words are largely meaningless, unless they are backed up by deeds? Can we accept that a family tree cannot hold us up, unless it bears good fruit?
- Wild John and homeless Jesus can be difficult to accept.
- John confronts us with a message of repentance. Turn away from sin and toward Jesus Christ; produce good fruit and prepare for Jesus’ baptism of Holy Spirit and fire.
- Wild John and homeless Jesus are waiting for your response.

May God bless you!