

16 December
Third Sunday of Advent
St Luke 3: 7 - 18

In the dark and scary mid 1930s, when the world was reeling from the devastating effects of the Great Depression, and when warlords and dictators were building up their military machine for what would soon become world war two, Frank Capra made several films about the ideals we treasure. One of them was called "Meet John Doe."

There was no John Doe, and the article in a newspaper was a complete hoax perpetrated by a reporter desperate to keep her job. According to the reporter, Mr Doe was so fed up with the world, and way people were treating each other, he was giving them until New Years Eve to change and start caring. Otherwise, he was going to jump off the top of the Empire State Building.

The hoax got out of hand when the story was syndicated and soon picked up by the news on the radio. The reporter was forced to produce John Doe to satisfy the newspaper editor. She found an out of work baseball player who was desperate for work so he could eat, and to cut to the chase scene - created a flesh and blood John Doe.

When he stood in front of a radio microphone to speak he was a nervous wreck. His broadcast started off rough and hesitant, but then he began speaking from his heart. Quit your meanness. Stop being selfish. Look at the neighbours on your street, and start connecting with them, and if they need a hand - give it, but above all, connect with people near you.

The message was heard across the country, and it resonated with people. They started talking with the people next door. One man said he thought his neighbour was the crankiest man he ever met because when he said hello to him, the man ignored him. After a while, he wanted nothing to do with him. But after hearing John Doe on the radio, he tried again, and discovered the man was deaf. He'd never heard the greetings. Soon, he had an ear trumpet, and was interacting with others again.

A couple became concerned about elderly neighbours who had become recluses, never went anywhere, and never let anyone in their home. They went to see them, and it turned out they had been selling their furniture and everything else they owned to pay for food and heat. The neighbours rallied round.

Story after story of people connecting with their neighbours, and then sharing what they had with them. Story after story of empathy and compassion. They didn't talk about it much, but got on with the important part of putting the teachings of Jesus into action. People felt better. They were talking together, and they started laughing again.

In a dark, dangerous, and frightening world that, many would say is very similar to our dark, dangerous and frightening world of today.

When we read our Gospel lesson, we find that John the Baptist is preaching, baptizing those who want to publically make a statement that they are making a clean break from previous ways of living, and start again. We should keep a couple of things in mind. John's baptism was nothing close to welcoming people into the Christian family like we do here at All Saints' and in other churches with the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is not to wash away original sin. It was a very tangible public expression of renewal and starting again and living by God's standards.

The second thing is to read the question, "What should we do?" Now, stop there. Sometimes we mentally move forward with three more words - to be saved? No. That question is asked elsewhere in the gospels, but not here. The question is for tangible direction. What are the next steps? How should we respond to the wider world, to the people around us? How do we get started?

John's answer is simple: Share what you have with others. If you have more than you can use, share with those who have nothing.

Sometimes, I think that John was the poster boy for the elegance of simplicity. He never organized anything. His belief was simple. We have gotten away from God's message and God's instructions. The religious authorities have cluttered up a direct relationship between humans and God with too many rules, and I ought to know - because I saw my father suffering under it as a priest at the temple. The senior leadership was more interested in protecting themselves and squelching others than anything else. We need to make a spiritual return to God.

John spoke from the heart, and when people wanted to know something tangible that they could do, he told them - share what you have with those who don't have enough - or anything!

At first that seems like basic human compassion, and it certainly does not take a man or woman of faith to see the needs of others and do the right thing. This is what you and I have been doing since we were children.

Jesus was much like his cousin. Jesus invited some friends to come along with Him so they could experience God's love and compassion in new ways. He showed them examples of genuine love when he healed, spoke to individuals and crowds, fed the hungry, and welcomed social unacceptable outsiders to spend time with Him.

And then Jesus told his 12 closest friends, to go out and make some new friends, and keep passing it along.

We saw it the first two Saturdays of this month when many of our members volunteered to help ring the bells for the Salvation Army Red Kettle drive in Saugatuck and Douglas. Every one of our volunteers, this year and in the past, has watched as parents give their children some coins, sometimes having to help them reach up to the kettle, to put them into the slot. Bell ringers personalize it and connect with others.

Bell ringing is one example. Add to it the presents that were wrapped for children in foster care in Ottawa County, the food we constantly collect and take to Christian Neighbours. And many of you, quietly, perhaps never saying a thing about your activities, do it in many other ways.

We have so learned the concept of giving that it is second nature to us. It is a good and wonderful thing, and when we give through worthy charities, it means that when our gifts are combined with others, far more good can be done. And experienced charitable groups have a far better idea of what is needed and where it should go. We need them. Period.

But we also need the person to person, one on one connection with others. For many years one of the best examples here at All Saints' was our own David VanderLaan. He volunteered to deliver Meals on Wheels, but soon learned this was not mere distribution of food. It was connecting with people, spending time with them - being the face of the saints.

I truly believe there is polarization in our culture. It's over politics, religion, and everything else. It's the silly debate whether a shop assistant in a retail store should greet us with "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays," or the list of approved 'good stores' that are Christmas friendly. We constantly create and use litmus tests to decide who is good and who is bad. Instead of loving each other and disagreeing over topics, it has become too easy to disagree and hate.

Part of the problem is our electronic media. In the early days of our country, farmers tried to time their field work so they would meet a neighbour at the fence. The horse or oxen could have a rest, the farmers would talk on what ever subject they chose. They didn't always agree, but when they went back to work they would think about their conversation, and then meet again an hour or so later and talk more.

Instant messaging, tweets, angry and hurtful comments made in all forms of social media, are destroying the heart and soul of this country. They are destroying us.

I know the response - times have changed. Of course they have, but the change is doing serious damage to our souls. We can be better than this. Jesus is constantly inviting us to be better.

Our world needs less talk about Jesus, less theology, less doctrine - and more people imitating Jesus and being Jesus to people nearby. Less structure, less institutionalized and rigid church and religion, and more spirituality and response. This time of the year the world is eagerly looking to see Jesus. There are many who hope they will see it in us - in our words, actions, and welcome.

Advent, we all agree, is a time for preparing for Christmas. The heart and soul of Christmas is connection - God's connection with humankind; our connection with one another.

During these last days of Advent, as we prepare, we can add something more - prepare for connections, care, compassion, and commune. To give and to receive as we build up the Kingdom of Christ.