

WHO ARE YOU? That seems to be a very basic, straight-forward question. Most of us, if asked that question, would simply state our names. Of course, a lot would depend on the circumstances in which the question is asked. For instance, if a stranger walked into the Church and asked me, “Who are you?” I would answer, “I’m Fr. Eschbach”. However, if I walked into a stranger’s house, went to the refrigerator and helped myself to a beer, if I wasn’t shot first, the question might be phrased like this, “Who do you think you are”? That is more the way these priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked John the Baptist the question. They really were asking him, “Who do you think you are?”, because most of them thought he was nuts. Isn’t it interesting how John answers them?

He doesn’t say, “I am John, the son of Zechariah, as most Jews at that time would identify themselves. Rather he says, “I am not the Christ”. So they start taunting him, “Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet?” “No,” John says, “I’m not all of that!” “Well, then,” they ask, “What do you have to say for yourself?” John replies, “I am the voice of one drying out in the desert, make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet, Isaiah said.” The priests, Levites, and Pharisees would have immediately understood from their reading of Isaiah that John was identifying himself as the one who would prepare the world for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

They don’t buy it. His inquisitors won’t give up. They challenge him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?” He knew they were mocking him, writing him off as a nut-job. He didn’t care. He knew what he was about. He knew his mission. So he gave it to them straight, “I baptize with water, but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.”

Another way he could have said it is, “I’m just a nobody trying to tell anybody about Somebody who has the power to save everybody.” And, in his own not too diplomatic way, John is telling them that in their unwillingness to hear him, to accept him, because of their belligerent, self-righteous attitude, they can’t even recognize that He, the Promised Messiah, is already in their midst.

I would like to suggest for your consideration this evening, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, that this interrogation of John the Baptist and his answers might prompt us to reflect on who we are and what we believe. If I asked you, “Who are you?” might you answer, “I am a Christian. I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He is the One of whom the Prophet Isaiah spoke: The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God.”

If you can answer, “Yes, that’s who I am,” may I propose another question to test that proposition? Do you then desire, as St. Paul suggests in our Second Reading this evening, that “the God of peace make you perfectly holy” or are you content to be “good enough”? Do you really seek holiness or are you satisfied that in keeping the rules you’re “good enough”?

Perhaps we might look at this from God’s perspective, He sent His Anointed One into the world because he sees us as the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, and the imprisoned, but He wants, in the words of Isaiah the Prophet, to clothe us with a robe of salvation and wrap us in mantles of justice. God wants to adorn us with crowns and bedeck us with jewels. How has God planned to accomplish this audacious task? By sending us the only One who can rescue us—His Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, it is God’s desire to make us perfectly holy by virtue of our relationship and intimacy with the One who is perfect holiness, Jesus, the Christ.

How then might we consider whether we are becoming perfectly holy or are we settling for “good enough”? St. Paul offers us a great means of self-reflection tonight: He says, “Rejoice always!” Am I a joyful person? Do I radiate joy to all I meet? Do I truly rejoice that I am God’s child, recognizing that I am joyful precisely because I experience the love of Christ in my life? It’s pretty plain, isn’t it? A person who is miserable, always complaining or finding fault, choosing to see what’s wrong, rather than rejoicing in the truth or what’s good or right might keep all the rules, but there’s no sense that Christ is in them. Actually such unhappy people tend to turn others away from Christ.

Paul then tells us “pray without ceasing”. Do I have a set prayer time every day in my life when I make time to be alone with God? Or do I pray only when I want or need God’s help? Is prayer an important part of my everyday life or is it a “life-line” I grab a hold on when all else fails?

“In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus,” St. Paul says. Do I truly thank God in the hard times, the painful times, the worrying times, the fearful times? Do I really thank him for being there in it with me and not leaving me alone? And do I thank Him in the good times, for the many blessings He showers upon me and see all that good coming from Him and not accomplished only by my own efforts?

This is a big one! “Do not quench the Spirit.” Do I listen to those promptings of my heart to reach out to someone in need or do I figure it’s none of my business or not my problem, and walk away? A man once confessed to me that he was not fulfilling his marriage promise because when he came home from work, he just wanted to relax and be relieved of the stress of the day and he was resentful because his wife wanted to talk and share what was going on with the kids or her parents, and he found it difficult to be present to her. That was the Spirit convicting him of negligence to his wife. He didn’t merely brush it

aside, but asked God's forgiveness and the grace to be there for her because she needed him and he loved her. He did not "quench the Spirit".

"Do not despise prophetic utterances", suggests that I need to be open to the perspectives and the points of view of others that are contrary to my own. None of us possesses the fullness of wisdom. God often reaches out to us through others in our lives who challenge us to be our best selves. He was doing that through John the Baptist to the priests, Levites, and Pharisees who just blew John off as "nut-job". Do I do that with those who question or challenge me?

"Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil." Evil is evil. We appear to be in an age of men behaving badly, with corporate, political, and media leaders, as well as T.V. and movie personalities accused multiple times of being abusive of women. Those who try to excuse away the bad behavior, or ignore it or, even worse, blame or shame those who were abused are complicit in the evil. Much as was the case in our own Church scandals in recent years. Again, Paul says, "Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil". That often means calling evil by its name and condemning it for what it is.

Finally, St. Paul tells us, "The One who calls you is faithful and He will also accomplish it." Desire then to be "perfectly holy". Don't just settle for "good enough".

Jesus tells us much the same thing. In Matthew 5:48 he tells us, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," and in Luke 6:36, he says, "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful". Tonight St. Paul tells us how we can cooperate with the work God is doing in us to make us "perfectly holy".

God sees greatness in each of us. That's why He desires to "clothe us in robes of salvation and wrap us in mantles of justice; adorn us with crowns and bedeck us with jewels." It hurts him to see us poor and broken-hearted; captive and imprisoned. He sent Jesus and anointed Him to gather us to Himself so that we may be holy as the Lord our God is holy.

This is our reason to rejoice. Why settle for "good enough" when you can be perfectly holy. It is the greatest "rags to riches" story there is. Say goodbye to the rags, for the Lord is offering you the riches.

REJOICE! THERE! I'LL SAY IT AGAIN, REJOICE!

BE HOLY AS THE LORD YOUR GOD IS HOLY!