

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Hearing John the Baptist this morning reminds me of a modern day prophet I met a few years ago. His name is Matthew Works, and he's a homeless man from Boston who travels the country sharing his story of how he lost his job at a time that he was suffering from an illness, and how those two events compounded to cause him to lose his home.

With no family to fall back on, his only option was the city's shelter program, which he discovered, as the vast majority of homeless men and women across America do each night, there is still no room at the inn. And so Matthew found himself in the one place he never thought he would have imagined; living on the streets of Boston.

Lost, disoriented, not sure where to turn or how to manage getting through each night. He eventually found some footing of sorts when a nearby Episcopal church decided to put an alter on wheels and to roll it out into the park and offer a weekly Eucharist to those who live there.

Matthew was moved by the church's compassion, and he attended each Sunday. He even began to volunteer as an acolyte and an occasional reader. The church's youth group eventually got involved and started serving sandwiches right on top of the altar after the service. Over time, a community of sorts began to form around that table, and Matthew felt that he had at least found some friends. Folks who might have his back as they navigated the daily uncertainties of life on the streets.

But eventually the seasons changed and the days grew colder and the nights longer. And then one morning after an unexpected cold snap, one of his friends was found frozen to death on a park bench. That tragedy opened Matthew's eyes to a reality that he had seen but had been blind to. And that is each week after the service, church volunteers covered that alter on wheels with a thick padding and a blanket and carefully wheeled it back into the church where it was locked away. Kept safe and sound protected from the elements, but while those who gathered around it were left in the cold.

Suddenly when it seemed at first like such an unusual act of compassion had become suddenly a dehumanizing reminder that at the end of the day there was more concern for the wellbeing of that wooden table than for the lives of those who had been drawn to it.

Matthew spoke up that following Sunday, and he has been speaking up ever since. Another voice in the wilderness calling on churches everywhere to repent, to repent, by opening not only their hearts, but their doors as well. To move from offering sandwiches to offering sanctuary in their sanctuaries, in the hope that if every church were to do so, every night in God's house, at least there would be always room at the inn.

That was more than 15 years ago. And Matthew and the half a million Americans who will be homeless tonight are still waiting. Advent is a time of waiting, waiting for the birth of the one who will proclaim a new kingdom, where the first will be last, and the last would be first. The outsider is welcomed, where the forgotten are remembered, where the invisible are fully seen, and the disposable finally valued.

It is a kingdom that Jesus proclaimed is already here, and not yet. And so we wait. Like John the Baptist, we wait for the day when the Pharisees and the Sadducees of this day – those who had been baptized by all manner of religious ceremony and ritual might be baptized by the Holy Spirit and be reborn into a new life dedicated to the new creation that we heard described so beautifully by the prophet Isaiah, where divisions are healed, where trust is restored, and justice prevails.

Like Matthew, John calls us to repent. What does he mean by that? Does that word sound negative to you? Does it sound like we're being scolded when you hear it? It's definitely not a word you hear preached from Episcopal pulpits on a regular basis, is it? For me, the word always brings to mind those crazy characters on the street corners, on boxes with bullhorns and long beards with signs that say repent, the end is near, which is actually a reasonably accurate description of John, isn't it?

What does it mean to you? Does it mean to be truly sorry? As we say at the beginning of the general confession, to feel remorse for what we have done and for what we have left undone. I think our prayer book is wise to start our confession with, sorry, but it doesn't end there. Because a sorry doesn't lead to some kind of lasting change in how we think and how we behave. And as any parents can tell you, it's not terribly interesting, is it?

To repent means to turn. To turn away from our old life, our old ways, and to reorient our lives into the way of Jesus. Turning is how our general confession ends. That we might walk in Your ways to the glory of Your name. That's what it means to repent, to let go of old assumptions, old imaginations and old excuses, and to try on something new, to experiment, to risk – to risk walking in the radically self-giving way of Jesus.

And it's not a one-time event, is it? Repenting is a never ending process that we all need to come back to time and again, each time pushing ourselves a little farther, giving ourselves away a bit more, and going ever deeper in our relationship with God and one another along the way.

Unless we are actively working our repentance, like as if an addict has to work their recovery. Unless we are doing that work, John says, our lives are mere chaff, empty husks to be discarded because they've been stripped of that which the world is so hungry for. Like the religious authorities that John scold so publicly, Christians have also discovered, have we not, how easy it is to get distracted when religious practices and ritual and liturgical perfectionism become the object of our faith rather than the transformation of our lives, which they were intended to point us to.

Look no further than the religious fights we've had over how much water is needed at baptism. Can you use just a sprinkle or do you need to go fully underwater? As some have

claimed, John the Baptist, I think is telling us it's never been about how wet we get but about how turned around we become as we emerge.

Without that, we are about trees which bear no fruit. And if repenting sounds like change to you, you're right. If that is one of the hardest things for you, you're not alone. Fortunately, as John tells us though, help is on the way. Because God sends the Holy spirit to anyone who will receive her.

All we have to do is to slow down a bit, set aside some of that busy-ness, and to listen, and then to wait; to wait long enough so that we can hear what our hearts have been trying to tell us for so long; to wait long enough to listen to that vague feeling of emptiness that's been nagging at us. What's that trying to tell us? To wait long enough to be reminded of what really gets us excited about life. What gets our passions going? What stirs our hearts, and what breaks your heart? And who does your heartbreak for, and then what gifts do you have that you need to give away?

But be warned, as many of you, no doubt, have already discovered the Holy spirit does not tend to think small. She isn't going to lead you to something that's comfortable, something that's safe. She's not going to lead you to something boring, or something that feels obligatory. It probably won't be something you can easily afford, but it will be something you can do with God's help and it will be something that will bless you and the world. In fact, it'll do it in ways you will never fully know.

If you've experienced that in your life already, then you know what comes next, don't you? Hold on, buckle up because you will find yourself doing things you never thought you should, saying things you never thought you would, and loving people you never thought you could.

And then get ready for the questions. Because when you turn your life toward Jesus, you will turn heads. Friends and total strangers alike will see the fruits of your life and will be blown away. And they will ask you, what are you doing? I heard about what you did last week. Tell me more. What motivated you to do something so amazing, so beautiful?

They even will ask you, how can I get involved? Neighbors and colleagues at work. They'll see the stories on Facebook and the changes in your life, and they're going to ask you, tell me more about that church you've been going to. Perhaps maybe some of that will rub off on me as well.

And all of this, if this sounds a bit over the top, if this sounds a little idealistic, Father Chris, don't take my word for it. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells His disciples before His suffering and death, do not be afraid. Just wait. Just wait, because you all will go on to do things greater than even I. And from what I know of the disciples, they too, were probably rolling their eyes like some of us might, but he was right.

According to the gospels, Jesus performed miracles that fed some at 9,000 people, if you add them all up, but the followers of Jesus, people like John van Hengel, motivated by

compassion he felt after watching a mother dig through discarded food behind a grocery store, decided to start what would become the nation's first food bank at his local church, and that led to another and to another, and eventually to a national movement and a national organization called Feeding America that feeds millions of Americans each year.

The gospel described how Jesus miraculously healed some 34 different people, as well as anyone who was brought to Him. But the followers of Jesus, people like Dr. Thomas Bond, motivated by compassion for those who could not afford a doctor, found a partner in Benjamin Franklin and founded the Nation's first public hospital. He treated the poor at no charge. And it pioneered a revolution in how we saw public health that would lead, again, to the healing of millions.

In the gospels, Jesus is Himself homeless, living off the hospitality of total strangers and reminding all of us that we were to do the same, to welcome them into our homes as well. Because when we do it to the least, we do it unto Him. And just last week, followers of Jesus, right here at this church, partnered with Detroit's Ruth Ellis center to pioneer what we are calling a home host program. The first of its kind in the state to encourage and support families who happen to have an extra bedroom to open their homes to homeless youth, LGBT youth, many of whom have been kicked out of their homes. Not for anything they've ever done, but simply for trying to be who they are.

If successful, like these other examples, these out of the box models that we come up with, motivated out of our compassion, this could be, too, exported to other churches across Michigan and then perhaps across America, trading a network of empty bedrooms and converted home offices. That just might be that missing link we've been looking for in that chain of services that might one day end homelessness. Not just for LGBT youth, but for Matthew Works, and for all the homeless children of God like him who've waited long enough.

The thing about repentance is you can begin again anytime. You don't have to be a certain age, a certain point of your life. You don't have to be a new Christian or a long time Christian. You can start and restart anytime – even right now. In our bulletin, our communicate each and every week, in addition to information about that home host program I mentioned, there are lots of different ways that you too can repent. You can serve food on Christmas brunch to folks who are lonely or lost.

The list is endless, but let me just give you the key and that is look for the thing that is most challenging. Let the spirit guide you to something that is the most out of your comfort zone, the one that gets your heart beating the fastest. Try starting there and then see where that leads you. Because let there be no doubt, when Christians repent, lives are saved and the world is changed. This advent as we wait for the birth of Christ, may we put history on notice once again, as we remind ourselves that with God's help, we are the ones we've been waiting for. Amen.

[End of Recording]