

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:7-18

December 16, 2018

BEARING GOOD FRUIT

There was a man who lived in this area in the early years of this congregation, who was a member of the Abington Friends Meeting House, until he was voted out. This was a man, born in England, who before coming to Abington had been a sailor, who lived in Barbados for a while, where he saw firsthand the barbarism of slavery. When he was 50, Benjamin Lay and his wife, Sarah, moved to Pennsylvania following the promise of William Penn's 'Holy Experiment,' where Quakers could live out their faith without persecution. However, Lay was greatly dismayed to learn that some Quakers in the area were slaveholders. In contrast to Quaker worship, which often has long periods of silence, he was in no way quiet about his conviction that Quakers definitely should not own slaves. It was so clear to him that slavery was wrong that he grew his own food and made all of his own clothes, so as to not use or partake of any product produced by slave labor. He did not want to be in any way complicit in the suffering of others.

Lay got to be well-known throughout the area for the ways he challenged others who did not support the abolition of slavery. One winter, he stood in the snow outside the Quaker meeting house with one foot and leg uncovered. When people urged him to come inside, he said, "Ah, you pretend compassion for me, but you do not feel for the poor slaves in your fields, who go all winter half clad." His antics were even more dramatic because of his dwarfism and a condition that hunched his back. His life was difficult, but that spurred him toward a keen awareness of other people's vulnerabilities. Once Lay showed up at a Quaker gathering in a military coat with a small sword by his side. When he rose to speak, he denounced the slave holders and thrust his blade into a container filled with red pokeberry juice. To the shock of all, he splattered the faux blood on his audience that included some slave owners.

That was some of the behavior that led to Benjamin Lay being voted out of the Abington meeting house membership, which did have some influential members who were slave owners. Soon thereafter, another Benjamin, with the surname Franklin, published Benjamin Lay's booklet that was one of the first issued works in the colonies that called for the abolition of slavery. In that work, Lay asked, "Is there any eviler fruit in the world than slave-keeping?"¹

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. We lit what we call the joy candle on our Advent wreath today. It seems therefore an odd time to be focused on someone who may have been an inspiration to Benjamin Lay, one John the Baptist, with his spirited preaching. In our reading from Luke, we hear John characterize people in a religious gathering as a "brood of vipers." He calls upon them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. He doesn't throw pokeberry juice on them, but it is a similar in-your-face approach that Benjamin Lay would later use. At a time when you and I might be content to simply enjoy the beautiful Christmas decorations and music, to be focused on what might be on our Christmas wish lists, we might be inclined to escort John the Baptist right out of our worship service.

I have to admit that I was not so thrilled to see this passage from Luke in the suggested lectionary readings for today with what sounds like shrill exhortations that seem counter to Christmas joy. Yet, here is John, and like Benjamin after him, he knows how to get people's attention, and he has something important to say. In our reading, the crowd asks him what they should do. John, like Benjamin after him, called upon his audience to change their insensitive economic practices. Those who had two coats were challenged to give one of them to someone who was without. Those who had more than enough food were told to give away some of their abundance. In the crowd, there were tax collectors who were notorious for cheating those from whom they collected. When they asked what they should do, they were challenged to be sensitive to the needs of others and to do their jobs with integrity, collecting no more than what was prescribed. We're also told that soldiers were present, asking what they should do. John told them not to use their power to extort from others, and not to further oppress the people in their charge.

In winter time we don't normally focus on fruit bearing practices, but a lifestyle of compassion, generous sharing with those in need, carrying out jobs with integrity

and fairness, using one's power in ways that demonstrate a commitment to the common wellbeing of all was a different kind of 'holy experiment,' what John the Baptist considered to be good spiritual fruit to be borne. And while we might simply be hoping for a beautiful Christmas experience, John the Baptist is preparing us to truly receive the Christ who comes. Perhaps we might recognize that true Christmas joy comes through honoring the birth of the world's most famous poor child and some of our Christmas practices might fall short of that. I leave it up to you to reflect on your Advent and Christmas practices. There is nothing wrong with Christmas being a beautiful experience, but what could be more beautiful than actions that reflect the love and compassion that Christ brings. Such acts lend integrity to the festivities.

Did you notice the last line in our reading from Luke? "So, with many other exhortations, (John) proclaimed the good news to the people." Good news? Yes, even that which can make us a bit uncomfortable can actually be good news, joyful news when we recognize and change whatever practices are inconsistent with the One whose arrival we want to celebrate.

Twenty-six years after Benjamin Lay first came to the Philadelphia area, the regional annual meeting of Quakers finally adopted a policy that members who engaged in the slave trade could be disciplined or disowned. When Lay was told, he said, "I can now die in peace." The next year he did.¹ Somehow the fruit of his life led to policies that were more compassionate and just. I'm not suggesting that any of you throw red pokeberry juice on anyone, but wouldn't it be a reason for deep joy, if through our Christmas practices, we inspired others to be a bit more compassionate and just like the One whose birth we celebrate? Wouldn't it be a reason for deep joy if we were more dedicated to sharing joy than in getting our share of it? There is something about the stories of Benjamin and John and Jesus that tell me that there is good news for this day, good news of great joy!

¹ History about Benjamin Lay reliant on:

<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/quakers-benjamin-lay-dwarf-abolitionist-slavery-abington-friends-meeting-20180419.html>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/05/14/in-the-belly-of-hell-the-quaker-abolitionist-disowned-by-his-faith-for-condemning-slave-owners/?utm_term=.d9a58f206a11

