

What then should we do?

Luke 3:7-17

Ute Molitor; First Congregational UCC; Camden; December 9, 2018

Oseola McCarty was born in Mississippi on March 7, 1908. She quit school after sixth grade because her single aunt needed long-term home care after being hospitalized. Oseola eventually became a washer woman just like her grandmother had been. She only quit working in 1994 when arthritis was making the work too painful. Oseola's mother and grandmother had taught her early about the importance of managing her money. She heeded that advice even though she only had little to set aside for a very long time. Oseola never owned a car. She walked everywhere and was known to push a shopping cart a whole mile to the next grocery store. Friends would give her a ride to her church, Friendship Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Oseola never married and did not have children. She inherited her uncle's little house and a little money from her mom, aunt and grandmother. Her bank noticed that she was accruing some money and an attorney, for whom she did the laundry, offered to help her to get her estate organized. When Oseola's own health began to decline, she determined to designate 10% of her estate to Friendship Church, 10% to each of her three remaining relatives and 60% to the University of Southern Mississippi.

Oseola worked with the university to set up a scholarship fund (over \$160,000), for gifted students for preferably African-American like herself, who would not otherwise be able to afford an education. She never got such an education, but she wanted others to have it. I doubt that she ever expected the kind of notoriety she would receive once her story made it into a newspaper. In short order, Oseola was invited to make the apple drop at the New Year's Eve celebration in New York City. That was the first time Oseola slept in a hotel bed and flew on an airplane. She ended up receiving multiple honorary doctorates, the Presidential Citizens Medal, and an award from the United Nations for her support of education. She once said that people often asked her, "Miss McCarty, why didn't you spend the money on yourself?" She would always answer: "Thanks to the good Lord, I am spending it on myself."²

What amazes me most about her story is the fact that she regarded fulfilling someone else's dream as the greatest gift she could give to herself. That was her idea of good stewardship. If you recall, I quoted Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on our stewardship kick-off Sunday as saying, "The future belongs to those who give the

²—Guideposts, September 1996, 5, cited in J. Ellsworth Kalas, *The Ten Commandments From the Back Side* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 88-89.

next generation reason for hope.” The future belonged to Oseola because her spirit was not cluttered with fear or only concern for its own survival. Her heart was wide open and spacious to give room for the dreams of others. I think Allen told us much the same in his own words today.

There are times in our lives when we need to return to God and rediscover our own sense of belonging to something greater than our individual lives. This is the meaning of repentance, as John the Baptist uses it in our text for today. The Greek word for that is *metanoia* and literally means, “a change of mind,” a change in consciousness. *Metanoia* or repentance implies an active asking to be realigned with God’s vision and love.

John the Baptist calls people to repent with utmost urgency. John believes that God’s intention is a divine clean-up of the world, as theologian J.D. Crossan calls it, to restore God’s vision and will on earth. It will come about when enough people repent. John isn’t exactly tactful about sharing his message, shouting: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Makes you feel right at home, doesn’t it? I remember having to preach on this text on “Bring a friend to church Sunday” at a different congregation. Anyway, I would venture to say that John has a rather “rugged version” of trying to speak the truth in love. This does not mean that he had a monopoly on the truth – more on that later.

According to the Gospel narrative, John’s purpose is to fulfill the prophetic task of preparing our hearts and lives for the birth of the Christ child. He is most passionate and earnest in wanting us to fill the valleys of our hearts that keep us caved in and wrapped around our own concerns.

Like Oseola, John knew that life is not an abstraction. I think that is why he says, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance (Luke 3:8a).” He is anchoring us right back in our own real and complex lives. John the Baptist also pulls out the rug from any sense of entitlement or false security based on the long covenantal relationship between God and the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, saying, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham (Luke 3:8b).” It’s like saying, ‘Don’t take God for granted, people. Just because you go to church or your parents and grandparents went to church does not mean that your life is pleasing to God or that God will protect you. God will find or create faithful covenant partners regardless.’”

In response, those listening to him, ask: “What then should we do?” John, to his credit, gets as direct and concrete in his suggestions as he was in his affront. He answers, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise (Luke 3:11)”. John advises tax collectors to take

no more than the amount prescribed to them (Luke 3:13). Soldiers should not use their power to extort money (Luke 3:14). In other words, the call is to share out of our abundance, to refrain from extortion, from abusing power, from cheating, oppressing and harming others in any way.¹

When people question John as to whether he is the expected Messiah come to restore Israel, John points to Jesus. He describes him as more powerful than anything John can offer (Luke 3:16). John mentions that Jesus will baptize not only with water but with fire and the Holy Spirit. John adds to this, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). We can hear in such images that John was expecting this great divine “clean-up” of the world (see *The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 74) to come in violent form: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Luke 3:9).” We do get a few passages, mostly in Matthew, where Jesus is portrayed as talking about a kind of separation at the time of the harvest or judgment time (i.e. Matthew 13:24-30 and 25:31-45). What are we to do with this?

Notice that Jesus says in Luke 7:28, “I tell you among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” In other words, there is something about John’s witness that does not yet reflect the depth of what Jesus is about. While I do think that God does not simply protect us from reaping the consequences of our actions, I think Jesus embodies for us that God is willing to bear them with us and to find a way forward. As Crossan suggests, Jesus acts non-violently and expects a transformation of hearts leading us to collaborate with God in building God’s realm here on earth. Jesus does speak of how much God desires us to bear fruit and that we sometimes may need some pruning of what gets in the way of a fruitful life (John 15:1-5). A key difference is that Jesus bases the ability to bear fruit on staying connected with him. Beyond doing the right thing, Jesus as the Christ is challenging us to change our consciousness about who and whose we are. So much of the hurt and injustice we inflict on each stems from a deeper sense of separation. We forget that we are one in Christ and that God actually already abides in us. Rather than making judgments about who is in and who is out, I think we are called to a discernment between wheat and chaff, especially in terms of what is life-giving and what is destructive in our mindsets and actions. We need the help of the Holy Spirit and humbly ask to be continually transformed.

¹ Some commentators suggest that the admonitions to the tax collectors and soldiers reflect the anxiety of second and third generation Christians who are trying to figure out how to live faithfully in their complex context.

By the power of the Spirit, Oseola had that rare gift of knowing with her whole being who and whose she was. Out of this sense of belonging, rather than fear, arose her ability to see that making a future possible for another was fulfilling her own dream.

We must also consider the question of “What then shall we do?” in our time when there are so many evident needs. We have children going hungry in our country and in places like war torn Yemen, people struggling to get off drugs or other addictions, struggling to get into housing, get adequate medical care and access to education. We have plenty of people who are lonely and afraid. The list goes on.

The point is not get discouraged but to draw strength from God’s spirit that is alive among us and for asking this spirit to transform us internally as well. Being part of a faith community is one of the rare opportunities to join with others in listening for a greater call, in grappling with what it means to love each other across our differences and our neighbors as ourselves. On this Stewardship Sunday, let us celebrate that we have the concrete opportunity to be stewards of hope through offering our pledges and time as well as considering planned giving. Every amount matters and reflects what Helen Keller once exclaimed: “Many persons have a wrong idea about what constitutes real happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.” Thank be to God. Amen.