

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent – C  
December 13, 2009 – Holy Angels Church  
Homilist: Rev. Roland M. LaPlante  
Readings: Zeph 3:14-18; Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18

**DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:** A number of years ago now, the dean of American Psychiatry, Dr. Karl Menninger, surprised a lot of people by writing a book called *Whatever Became Of Sin?* He began the book with a humorous but thought-provoking story.

One sunny day in September 1972, a street preacher appeared on a busy corner in downtown Chicago. As office workers hurried by on their way to lunch, the street preacher would suddenly raise his right arm, point a body finger at an office worker, and shout, “Guilty!” He did this every few seconds to different people as they passed by him. “The effect on the pedestrians was almost eerie,” said Dr. Meninger. They would glance at the preacher, look away, glance back at him, and then hurry on.

No doubt, John the Baptist had a similar effect on people when he showed up on the banks of the Jordan River. Some people, I’m sure, ridiculed him...considering him some kind of nut. Some were angered

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by him for his presumption. But others knew deep down in their hearts that they were indeed guilty of wrongdoing.

For example, today's gospel reading mentioned several different groups of people who came to John with questions: There were the tax collectors...they knew they were guilty of overcharging people. There were soldiers...they knew they were sometimes guilty of bullying people. And many of the others there knew they weren't sharing their surplus with those who didn't even have the necessities of life...it's the "I've got mine...you get your own, attitude."

And that's Dr. Menninger's point in his book. They knew they were sinful people, whereas today, many people refuse to admit the same thing. Today, no one is ever at fault...there's never anything to confess; all actions are rationalized by such statements as..."Well, my family comes first; or I deserve this; or if I don't someone else will; or how c an

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it be wrong if it feels so good?..and finally, who's the Church to tell me what's right and wrong?

Nevertheless, deep down, we all know there are things about our lives that are sinful. That's why the street preacher's single word..."Guilty!" had such an eerie effect on those Chicago office workers.

John the Baptist, like the street preacher, confronted people where they were most vulnerable...in their hearts. John challenged them to look into their hearts and acknowledge their sinfulness. In fact, he did more. He even challenged them to do something about what they saw there...he challenged them to turn away from their sins and to turn back to God.

But we can't turn back to God without first recognizing that we ARE sinful people. A vivid illustration of what John was challenging people

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to do is found in a story I once read about someone who was about to take a shower. He had one foot in the shower and the other foot still on the bathroom mat when it suddenly occurred to him that this was a good picture of his life. He had always wanted to commit his life to God, but he couldn't quite do it. He always kept one foot in and one foot out...very much like St. Augustine before his conversion to Christianity. When he got to the point where he was starting to think about God, he would pray: "O God, make me chaste; but not yet!" Now, it seemed to the character in my story that the moment had finally come when he had to decide for God, or against him.

Standing there, he thought about what choosing God would cost him. The price would be high, he knew. But he was tired of living in two worlds and enjoying neither one. So, he took a deep breath, and said out loud, "Lord, I choose you!" And when he then stepped into the shower,

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it was for him a true baptism. It's this kind of a change of heart that John was calling upon people to make.

Well, how does this apply to us? Let's go back to that street preacher. All of us are guilty of some wrongdoing in our lives. If there's any doubt about that in our minds, we only need to read the first letter of John. There, the apostle says with uncharacteristic bluntness: "If we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves, we make God a liar, and his word is not in us."

John admits what Dr. Menninger says we must all admit if we want psychological and especially spiritual health. We must admit that we are sinner. In other words, we may be beautiful people, we may be loveable people, but we're also weak people...as you may remember from my homily on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. All of us have areas

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in our lives that need to be presented to Jesus for healing and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Confession and Reconciliation.

So, Advent is a time when we admit this. It's a time for repenting of our sins, confessing them, and opening our hearts to Jesus our Savior. It's a time to do what the character in my story did...a time for deciding not to go on living in two worlds and enjoying neither one. It's a time for taking a deep breath and saying to God, "Lord, I choose you!"

Let me end with another short, short story. A grandfather often shared stories with his grandchildren that offered a lesson intended to cultivate wisdom. On one occasion, he told them that every person has two wolves inside of them who are engaged in an ongoing struggle. One is the wolf of justice, peace and loving kindness; the other is the wolf of hatred, fear and greed. "Which wolf will win?" asked a grandson. The

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grandfather replied, “Whichever one we feed.” So, I suggest we choose carefully.