



## Make a Straight Path

Texts: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; Mark 1: 1-11

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I want to show you a picture. Yup – that’s me, at the time of my ordination in 1973. What a wild, ridiculous-looking character I was back then. I was sent off to a small, four-point charge in rural Manitoba, and I’ve often wondered what those honest, hard-working prairie farmers must have thought when they first saw their new minister arrive from down east. Yikes! What’s worse, in the end it wasn’t the wild hair and the scraggly beard that was the scariest thing about their new minister; no, what was scariest was that, at 23 years old, with six years of University, I knew everything there was to know about anything in the whole wide world. I could and, believe me, I did wax wise and eloquent on every subject under the sun; and my special gift, my best-developed talent, was telling people what was wrong with the world. I knew what was wrong with American politics, Canadian politics, the economy, sexual ethics in our time, teenagers, families, marriage – why, I knew what was wrong with everything, and my sermons were fiery, self-righteous condemnations of every living thing under the sun. I must have been a royal pain in the ass, but the people of Cartwright-Mather Pastoral Charge were unfailingly kind, unfailingly supportive, unfailingly gentle – embracing Nancy and me in a community of caring the equal of which we have rarely experienced since.



I show you that picture, and tell you that about myself, so you will understand why John the Baptist is one of my favorite Biblical personae. John was a wild and colourful character, to say the least. We have no idea what he looked like, but it’s easy to imagine him with wild, flying hair and a long scruffy beard. Matthew tells us he wore a cloak made of camel hair – which must have been something to see, never mind to smell; his only other garment was, apparently, a leather loincloth. He lived in the wilderness, eating only grasshoppers and wild honey, so it’s fairly safe to conclude from all of this that John was, well, a piece of work. But boy, could he draw a crowd. Much like an earlier version of me, John was obsessed with everything that was wrong in the world, and his preaching was a fiery, self-righteous condemnation of wrong-doing in all its many manifestations. He was the original fire-and-brimstone guy, and everyone since him has been a pale imitation. *“You brood of vipers!”* he thundered. *“What makes you think you can escape the coming retribution. The axe is being laid to the tree, and any tree that does not produce good fruit will be thrown on the fire.”* Amen, brother.

John was totally fascinated by the question of right and wrong. For him, the world divided pretty easily into two distinct camps – good and evil – and the task of the faithful follower was straightforward: to develop the good and purge the evil from their lives, no matter how difficult that purging might become. For John, there was no middle ground, no compromise; evil was a serious matter, a matter of life and death. People flocked to hear his simplistic but powerful proclamation, and many were baptized while they were there. Now the baptism offered by John was very different from Christian baptism; for John, this was a simple matter of moral purification. It wasn’t for children at

all; it was for adults, and above all it was for sinners. John's baptism was a straight-forward washing away of accumulated evil in one's life; it was a way of cleaning off some of the baked-on grunge, much in the way one might scrub a barbecue grill before starting out on a new set of steaks. John's baptism was not a sacrament of blessing; it was a high-power cleansing, somewhere between a touchless car wash and the process one goes through the night before a colonoscopy.

One more thing you need to know about John. John was a cousin to Jesus – I can't figure out the difference between first and second cousins in my own family, never mind this "once-removed" nonsense, so I have no idea what kind of cousin he actually was. But he was a cousin. And so it happened that when Jesus was about to set out on his own ministry, he went to see John, with the intention of being baptized. Jesus wanted the scuzz washed out of his own life, so he could start his ministry with a clean slate – I know that doesn't fit with traditional Christian theology about Jesus as sinless from birth to death, but there's no other way to make sense of Jesus showing up at the river that day. So the cousins meet, John does baptize Jesus, and after a period of self-examination and reflection, Jesus sets out at last on his own preaching ministry.

At first, it seems that Jesus simply picked up where John left off. Conventionally, we like to think of Jesus in soft pastel colours but that is a complete misrepresentation of the man. Jesus went straight from the Jordan to proclaim a rigorous moral standard, addressing issues such as revenge, the treatment of women, adultery, the honouring of promises in a way that is absolute and uncompromising. And he could express his sense of outrage in colourful terms, not unlike his bohemian cousin: he would call Herod, the Roman ruler of his country, "that fox"; he dismissed the religious leaders of the day as whitewashed tombs, and sent his best friend away calling him Satan. Jesus was quite capable of moral outrage on a scale that would have given his cousin a run.

Very quickly, however, it seems that Jesus figured out something that always eluded John. John knew there was something missing in his preaching; at one point he said, "I baptize you for repentance, but I'm not fit to even carry the sandals of the one who follows me." But it fell to Jesus to figure out what the missing element was. John, you see, like many of us preachers, was very good at telling people what was wrong with their lives, with society, with the world. But Jesus quickly realized that this wasn't enough; people needed to know not just what was wrong, but they also needed to know how to turn their lives around. John was great at defining the line between right and wrong and condemning the wrongs of the world as he saw them; Jesus took that and added to it the element of redemption. Jesus not only told people what they were doing wrong; he told them, and more importantly he showed them, how to put their lives back in order. Jesus never, ever stopped at condemnation; he always, without exception, threw people a rope. Think of the stories:

- Jesus meets a tax collector, Zacchaeus, sitting up a tree; this little man was so hated by the crowd that they wouldn't let him through to see Jesus any other way. Jesus scolds Zacchaeus for his dishonesty, but then tells him exactly what he needs to do to put things right with his neighbours.
- Jesus meets an adulterous woman who is about to be stoned to death for her sins. Jesus tells her, in no uncertain terms, to cut it out – but he also offers her an avenue to be saved from a terrible death by stoning.
- Jesus meets a rich young man, who like many rich young men is chronically unhappy with his life. Jesus offers him a clear path to fulfillment – a path which sadly he rejects.

The stories go on and on: Nicodemus, the woman at the well, Mary and Martha, and so on. And of course the stories would culminate in The Story – of Jesus crucified and resurrected, in order that people might be restored to rightness in their relationship to God. How we understand that story in its particulars is not important today. What is important is to see how, for Jesus, defining the straight and narrow way was an important step to the fullness of life. But it was only a first step. There was, then, a need for something more. People needed to understand not just what they were doing wrong – but also needed to be shown a way to put things right again.

OK – we’re twelve minutes into the sermon, so let’s now get to what this sermon is really about. This is a sermon about parenting. I know I haven’t mentioned parenting yet, but we’re going to do a bit of a course-correction here. And I want to be clear about two things. Firstly, nothing that follows is to be interpreted by anyone as criticism of their particular parenting style – anything offered here is put forth 100% in the general, and 0% in the particular. I also want to be clear that I don’t consider myself in any sense a parenting expert – I have three kids wandering around this country who would be more than glad to write “poof” over that idea if I were to entertain it even for a moment.

With those two disclaimers in place, then, let me say this: I think we have a parenting crisis in Canada. I’m an inveterate people-watcher, and I love kids – especially little kids and teenagers. I’m not so fond of ten year olds – I’ve long believed that 10-year-old boys are proof that Satan is real. But I do love watching people – and especially children – and as I’ve watched kids over these last few years, I have come to the conclusion that we have far, far too many unhappy children in Canada. And those unhappy children aren’t just in urban ghettos, not just in crowded downtown neighbourhoods, not just in places like Flemingdon Park. Those unhappy kids are in this neighbourhood, too. I made passing reference to this in the sermon last Sunday, and there was a funny kind of nervous giggle that went through the congregation when I said it – the kind of laughter you sometimes hear when you’ve cut a little too close to the bone. As I say, I’ve been watching a lot of kids lately; I watch them come and go from our nursery school, in Sunday School, on streetcars and buses, in the schoolyard when I deliver Sarah on Monday mornings, wandering the halls of the church. And I’ve been watching for kids who look just, well, really happy, kids who are skipping, laughing spontaneously, singing happy songs, playing foolish games, telling silly jokes. And you know what? I don’t see very much of that at all around me these days. I see kids, including teenagers, who look and sound stressed, unsure of themselves, aggressive, sulking, rude, excessively competitive, and even angry a lot of the time. And I don’t like what I’m seeing. Most of the time, these days, when I watch kids at play, I end up feeling more sad than glad, and I can’t believe that’s a good thing.

Now, I know there are many, many factors that go together to make for happy communities of children and young people. There are economic factors, health issues, issues of security in the home, to say nothing of more extreme factors like outright neglect and abuse. I have neither the wisdom nor the time to speak to the panoply of forces which impact on children’s lives in our time; I’m sure there are 100 seminars, countless self-help groups, therapists, educational theorists and others who can fill in the gaps better than I could imagine doing.

But let me go back to John the Baptist and his clearly delineated sense of the difference between right and wrong. You see, I think kids need, and even at some deep level want, clarity about the difference between right and wrong. And I think that’s true whether we talk about very young

children, or even teenagers. Kids need to know, and want to know, where the boundaries lie between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. This is the reason why kids, and especially teenagers, are so famous for pushing the boundaries – they want to know where the edges are, how firm those boundaries are, and what are the consequences for violating them. If kids don't get clear feedback during that testing process, they are going to keep pushing, keep testing, keep going further and further to see what will happen. And the result is that aggressive, competitive, angry, sulking behaviour we see in so many children so much of the time these days. Kids need to know, in clear terms that they can understand, the difference between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. And far too many kids today are not getting that information . . . they're not getting it from their schools, they're not getting it from their churches, and they're especially not getting it from their parents.

There are lots of reasons, of course, for why that's happening. Today's parents are barraged by so much information, so many people telling them what to do, that in many cases they've lost all contact with their basic instincts about how their children should behave. We see unacceptable behaviour in our kids and, instead of responding to it firmly and clearly, our minds go into panic mode. What did we read about this in *Today's Parent*? What did that guy say at the workshop last week? What will other mothers think of me if I make a big deal of this right here in the middle of the grocery store? There's such enormous pressure to be the *perfect* parent of the *perfect* kid that basic instincts – the instincts that guide the birds and the bees and that guided our parents and their parents before them – are numbed by an avalanche of people and information telling us how to shape our designer children. Then, too, in a culture where so much child-rearing is done by nannies and childcare centres, with the result that the actual time spent by parents with their kids is so small, there's a natural desire amongst parents for that time to be good, friendly, non-confrontational. We only have an hour with the kids tonight – we don't want to fight about right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. We want our kids to be our friends, not our adversaries in some cosmic battle over morality; we want to read them bedtime stories, not tell them their behaviour is unacceptable and must therefore change. And then, of course, there's the whole question of moral relativity that dominates our culture in these times. As adults, we're pretty soft ourselves on right and wrong these days, so it's not surprising that we find it hard to be clear with our kids. There are many, many reasons but, the bottom line, I contend, is that too many kids today are not having one of their most basic and important needs met: they are not being taught that there's a difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, a difference between right and wrong.

And there's one more thing to be said. I made the point earlier that Jesus built his gospel on top of the teachings of John the Baptist: he took John's passion for moral behaviour, and he added to it his own passion for throwing a lifeline to people who were drowning. Jesus never downplayed the importance of moral discernment but he understood that even when the spirit is willing the flesh is sometimes weak, so he insisted on teaching and showing people not just what "wrong" looked like, but also how to put things back together when they had done wrong. Kids need to know the difference between right and wrong. They also need to know, however, that when they do wrong, as we all sometimes do wrong, there is an opportunity and an obligation to do everything possible to make things right again . . . even when such atonement is won at great cost. At this point in writing this sermon, the temptation to tell cute and heart-warming stories about our own kids was almost over-whelming but I've resisted because it's really not fair to my sons to do that. But let me say this: Nancy and I didn't have a lot of mantras with our kids but one of them was: "When you mess up,

you've got to fix it. We are NOT going to fix it for you. We'll show you how to fix it, and we'll even help you fix it if you need help. But *we* aren't going to fix it – and *you* are." University recruiters and those responsible for orientation programs tell us that their greatest single problem these days is dealing with parents who constantly run interference for their kids, rather than letting their kids work things out for themselves. Teachers, and especially private school teachers, tell us that this is a trend which begins long before University – a trend that drives them crazy, and limits their ability to teach kids both that actions have consequences, and that restoration – yes, atonement – is one of them. It may seem counter-intuitive, but I am prepared to insist that kids are happier, and teenagers are happier, and adults are happier, when they learn how to clean up their own spilt milk. And that was Jesus' message to Zacchaeus, to the prostitute, to the little rich man and countless others: "You've messed up. Now, for your own sake, your own happiness and the happiness of others, make it right."

Let me conclude now. We're a post-theistic congregation. We believe that sacredness, holiness, wonder is found in the community of which we are a part. In a few minutes, we'll baptize Clark Tiffin. This is such an important moment in our congregational life, because if you believe that holiness is found in each other, then every time we baptize a child into the community we open one more channel to grace, we recognize one more face of God in our midst. These children are the gift of sacredness to us all. But because they are so important to us, we have a responsibility to them in return. I have long believed – in fact, its been sort of a touchstone of my ministry – that the extent to which congregations do a good job of ministering to children and youth is a good measure of the extent to which they are actually churches at all. I think Jesus would be absolutely on my side in that belief . . . and I always like it when Jesus agrees with me. Kids need to know the difference between right and wrong, and they need to know how to respond when they do the wrong they do. There aren't a lot of places in the world where they are going to learn that today. It's our responsibility, as a church, to offer parents every possible support in imparting that wisdom to the children in their, and our, care.

Amen.