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Change of Heart

Luke 3:10

Looking in the mirror can be a painful experience. The noted historian John Hope Franklin had this truth in mind when he entitled his autobiography *Mirror to America*. There he describes his long struggle against racial barriers. Even when he reached the pinnacle of his profession the old world of racism continued to stalk him. He describes being in Washington D.C. to accept an award. He was staying at the Cosmos Club. He had just finished having dinner with some friends. He describes what happened next in these words:

It was during our stroll through the club that a white woman called me out, presented me with her coat check, and ordered me to bring her coat. I patiently told her that if she would present her coat check to a uniformed attendant, 'and all of the club attendants were in uniform,' perhaps she could get her coat (*Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin*, page 340).

The next day, Franklin went to the East Room of the White House to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor which our nation bestows on a civilian.

Franklin's book challenges us to recognize that we will never leave the old world behind until we learn to hold up the mirror that reveals the painful truths. Many of you know that one of my interests has been researching my French Huguenot ancestry. I have been very fortunate to have learned a great deal about my Huguenot ancestor who came to America in 1688. The Reverend Jean Bertrand was born and educated in France. He was the third generation of his family to become a Protestant minister. He fled the genocide directed against Protestants by Louis XIV. He spent the better part of 12 years in England before he boarded a ship for America. In Virginia he served as pastor of an Episcopal church and purchased a plantation.

It has been fascinating to find documents relating to all of these facets of his life. But one day I discovered a document that I could not ponder with any joy. It is an application for a tax exemption on personal property. The property consisted of two slave boys who were too young to be productive workers. By registering those boys he could avoid paying tax on them until they were older. This document was a powerful mirror revealing a horrendous truth about the American dream that he and so many other European immigrants were pursuing. He had fled from one form of evil to willingly participate in another. We are indeed blessed by the faith and courage of our ancestors. But we also carry the curse of the evil that they practiced. That painful truth is part of who we are.

Painful truths lay at the heart of the ministry of John the Baptist. In the third chapter of Luke's Gospel we find John holding up a mirror for the people who come to hear his message. Luke tells us that John is baptizing people from the crowds which gather about him. The act of baptism had a meaning for first century Jews that is very different from what it has for us. The only baptized people they knew were Gentiles who chose to become Jews. Baptism was a sign of their conversion to Judaism. The idea that Jews also need to be converted through baptism is an insult to their understanding of their ancestry. John is saying to his fellow Jews that their spiritual condition is no longer assured by their bloodline. In God's eyes, they are no better than the Gentiles. It is not good enough to belong to the right church or have the correct theology or to live in a country that is blessed

by God. The only way to get right with God is to admit that we are not right with God. To do that we must look into the mirror which tells us the painful truth that our hearts need to be changed.

For John the Baptist the practice of baptism is about holding up that mirror. Luke tells us that John refuses to baptize those who are not willing to face the painful truth of who they are. He will not baptize those who come confident of their own sense of goodness or satisfied with the status quo. The baptism of John requires a willingness to change.

The rock star Bono has been traveling across the country calling people to face up to the need for change. He is pointing to the wildfire of AIDS which is spreading across Africa consuming eight thousand lives a day. He argues that we can no longer accept that kind of status quo. He says it like this:

We can get cold fizzy drinks to the farthest reaches of Africa, but we can't get lifesaving medicines to the people who need it most? I don't have any letters after my name...I don't even have a name after my name...but I am determined to turn around this supertanker of indifference (quoted by Heidi Husted Armstrong, *Presbyterian Outlook*, December 4/11, 2006, page 8).

This is the kind of repentance that John the Baptist preached.

Luke tells us that when John refuses baptism to those who are not ready to repent, people in the crowd begin to ask, "What then should we do (Luke 3:10)?" John tells them that the best way to demonstrate their willingness to change is to share what they have with others. They are to share food and clothing with those who do not have enough. Tax collectors are instructed to be honest, no longer lining their pockets at the expense of the tax payers. Soldiers are told to stop victimizing the public they are charged to protect. John doesn't tell anyone to enter a monastery or go to seminary or take a vow of poverty. They are to reject the strategies of selfishness that have defined their lives so that they can begin to experience a change of heart.

Do you remember the famous Spencer Tracy/Kathryn Hepburn movie, "Woman of the Year?" It was based on a play by Ring Lardner which tells of the love affair and marriage between a sophisticated globe trotting career woman and a down to earth sports writer. After several months of marriage the sports writer discovers that he is just one among many concerns that his wife is juggling in her hectic life. When it becomes clear to him that she is unwilling to change enough to accommodate the marriage, he walks out on her.

This rejection leaves the Kathryn Hepburn character in a state of crisis. It forces her to reevaluate her values and her loyalties. She then finds herself attending the surprise wedding of her widowed father to a long-time friend. The words of the wedding ceremony become for her a revealing mirror, letting her see for the first time who she really is. She realizes that she has been unwilling to be changed by her wedding vows. This is a discovery that puts her on the road to repentance. She seeks out her estranged husband to tell him of her change of heart. She begs him for another chance. She says, "Pop and Ellen were married last night. I listened to the words." The Baptist could not have said it any better.

When Advent gives way to Christmas we will sing the carol "In the Bleak Midwinter." The last stanza expresses the nature of the journey which John the Baptist challenges all of us to take.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wiseman, I would do my part.

Yet what can I give him? Give my heart.