**Homily for December 10, 2023 Mark 1:1-8 “Learning from Loonies”**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

My spouse is a licensed mental health professional. *Her* daughter has degrees in psychology and neuroscience and public health. My *sister* holds a doctoral degree in clinical psychology. And in my extended family and friends, I have bi-polar folks, schizophrenic folks, depressed folks, many varieties of mental challenges. And so, you might be wondering why I am so crass, or maybe just so clueless, so lacking in sensitivity that I would title this message “Learning from Loonies”. You might wonder about that, and I am ready to defend my choice, but full disclosure: I am a loony. And you have been learning from this particular loony for the last fifteen years!

Loony, of course, comes from *lunatic,* and that comes from the Latin, meaning moon-touched, as the Irish say. It was – and maybe still is – believed that some folks are negatively affected by the lunar cycle and misbehave more when the moon is fully in its glory. Science or not, there is a substantial uptick in certain kinds of crimes and injuries around a full moon; folks in the police forces and the emergency rooms can almost set their watch by this phenomenon. Lunatic was once a technical term, and loony was its everyday version, but these have long lost their medical credibility. Loonies can seem dangerous and unstable and a host of other unpleasantries, but these feelings are pretty subjective. So rather than stress you out any more about loonies, and specifically about John the Baptist, the loony featured here at the beginning of Mark’s gospel, I am going to pivot to another term that is more or less the same thing but not quite so intimidating. Let’s talk, instead, about *eccentrics.*

ECCENTRIC: 1. Departing from a recognized, conventional, or established norm or pattern; or one that deviates markedly from an established norm, especially a person of odd or unconventional behavior.

To say that my favorite loony, John the Baptist, was eccentric is about as revelatory as saying that the sky is blue or that falling down on concrete hurts a lot. John the Baptist fits all of the definitions of eccentric, and probably added some of his own. That *he* would be the advance man for the Messiah is unthinkable by modern standards, or at least by conventional standards, which kind of proves its own point. And so Advent comes again to remind us that, no matter how much we try to homogenize God and the spiritual nature of life, God will not climb into our carefully constructed little boxes, because God is…well, eccentric. God is the *only* deity of the thousands advanced by humankind that embodies love and grace and forgiveness, who delights in justice and kindness and virtue. As gods go, Yahweh is eccentric, deviating from the established norms and patterns for gods. And if *that* is true, then Jesus and Mark and Paul and Peter and Mary and Martha and you and me, as children of God, we are eccentric, too. Ironic that we live in a culture that thinks *us* the squares and themselves the groovy ones. Because, friends, eccentricity is in our DNA.

So when I flippantly use loony or eccentric to describe myself and God and lots of folks, I am not speaking disparagingly of the legitimate sufferers of mental impairment. I am proudly claiming my place amid the ranks of the NQR, the not-quite-right, whose creativity bubbles over into social discomfort to those around them. And, I must offer one significant caveat to all of this unbridled talk of eccentricity; that the oddness of John and Jesus and the aforementioned cast of characters, including you and me, can only serve our eccentric God if it is more effective than offensive. We can be – indeed, we must be – out of step with convention to be faithful to Jesus’ teaching, but not so far out of step that people run the other way. Eccentricity can be a *tool*, but it can never be the goal, at least not for us.

Consider the example of our main eccentric today, John the Baptist. We see him in our mind’s eye as brutish, rough, unkempt, probably. Voice hoarse from exhorting the crowds, clothes of the least stylish kind – I mean really, who wears woven camel hair in the desert? – unusual diet, the kind of loud local loony you would walk across the street to avoid. Eccentric, certainly, in every way. But was he more effective than offensive?...oh, my golly, yes! John was compelling, engaging, and had, at the time of his death, enormous numbers of followers, more than his cousin Jesus of Nazareth ever had. In fact, they were, for the most part, the *same* followers; Jesus inherited those crowds after John’s untimely beheading. John used his eccentricity as a tool to engage the minds and hearts of those who would one day need those minds and hearts to follow Jesus. And it was effective for him because he was a walking, talking billboard for his own message. Not a wanton wee thing, not a wild, out-of-control guy, John had a sobering message about changing one’s life through *metanoia*, the changing of one’s mind, and he embodied it, rather than just talk about it, or suggest it for other people.

Jesus, for his part, picked up the mantle of eccentricity and wore it proudly. Unmarried, essentially homeless, giving new and novel interpretations of the Law, healing, restoring, raising folks from the dead, Jesus was unconventional in the extreme. If the Pharisees had access to a word like loony they would have used it, no doubt! And yet, effective, too, obviously, since millions who have never met him still follow his teaching and revere his example. I assure you, a bland, milquetoast, convention-bound personality would not have survived the test of time…Jesus was both eccentric and effective.

Which brings us right around to us, as the gospel always will, and our role as it overlaps with Johns, for we are preparers of the way, too, advance gals and guys for the message of Jesus. Following his example, we must do our work and live our lives in expression of the God we know and revere, a God who is in all things original, a God who claims sameness with no one. And so, we United Methodist Christians do not require a confession, a creed, a one-size-fits-all way of following Jesus, instead we forge our own eccentric path, which is sometimes effective and other times not, but fails most often when it leaves the original blueprint behind and tries to be conventional. An impossibility, that; for we cannot trumpet the message of an eccentric God with our lips tightly pursed in judgment, all prim and proper. For people to see the richness of God as revealed in us, we have to allow our oddness to show, our distinctiveness. We do not wear little Methodist uniforms; we do not issue little Methodist identification cards; we strive to live fully-flowered lives of love and joy and gratitude, and each life is an original, because God made us that way!

Is Trinity eccentric? Yes. In our role as community leaders, in our role as a Reconciling Congregation, in our role as host to a panoply of groups and causes, we honor God by being unconventional. Should Trinity be more eccentric than it is? I think so, more radical, more effective in showing forth the God of *all* the nations, not just the light-skinned, cleanly shaven ones. The world seems persuaded that we are yesterday’s news, as dry as toast, as boring as can be. But if we are faithful, friends, they will not only be wrong, but amazed and hopefully welcomed. We can yet be the voice in the wilderness that has grown up all around us, calling forth, sharing the truth, and illustrating the wondrous variety of God with our wondrously varied lives. So, in the name of Jesus, who quite unconventionally was born in a manger, performed miracles on a regular basis, and rose from the dead, we are invited into our distinctiveness. We are invited to lend our colors to this great evolving portrait of God that we sometimes call Life. We are invited to be eccentric, and effective, both. Amen.