

Rakes and Winnowing Forks

December 17, 2006

(Advent 3 - Year C)

Luke 3: 7-18

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

There is one thing that I did not count on when moving from Houston to Waco.

I did not count on the fact that Houston has pine trees, which never really lose their leaves in the fall.

But, Waco is filled with deciduous trees, which *do* lose their leaves.

And, in my backyard, I have 2 large trees, which, in November, were filled with nice, green leaves.

Then, right after Thanksgiving, the leaves turned crispy brown and blew off, blowing right into my backyard and into my swimming pool.

So, for the last 2 weeks on my day off on Thursdays, I have spent a better part of those days raking leaves and cleaning the pool.

As I have been raking, my prayers have gone to the Advent hero of John the Baptist, and to the 17th verse in the 3rd Chapter of Luke's Gospel, that we read today.

In that verse, John the Baptist speaks of the one who is to come, the one who is Jesus.

And, John the Baptist says this about this Jesus who is to come:

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary;

But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

As I have spent hours and hours with a rake in my hand, I have thought about Jesus' winnowing fork in his hand, clearing his threshing floor.

It doesn't seem to matter to me what a winnowing fork really is or what a threshing floor really is.

I just like the sound of those words, as I have raked and rubbed my hands raw in the freezing cold.

As I held the rake in my hands, in my mind, I heard the sound of these

Gospel words:

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary;
But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

However, if you know something about the history of agriculture, then you do know that a winnowing fork is a tool that was used to separate the usable wheat from the unusable stalks and twigs and chaff.

Grain was laid out on the threshing floor, then thrown into the wind, using a winnowing fork.

The wind would blow away the unusable chaff, leaving the good wheat behind.

My rake is used to clear away the dead and brown leaves.

The winnowing fork is used to clear away the chaff.

And, Jesus will come with his winnowing fork in his hand, to gather together the good wheat and to clear away whatever is unusable and dead.

Or, in the words of the Nicene Creed, Jesus will come again, to judge the living and the dead.

I don't know about you.

But, I don't like to think about judgment very much.

Frankly, I don't think that most Episcopalians like to think about judgment very much.

Or rather, we don't like to think about *our own* judgment very much.

However, we don't seem to have any problems being the ones who do the judging.

I don't know about you, but I don't seem to have too much trouble in using the winnowing fork to rake others.

In the last few weeks, our family has enjoyed looking at the Christmas light displays in the yards of other people in Waco.

Or, to be perfectly honest, we have enjoyed judging the lack of taste in the light displays in the yards of other people.

Last Thursday morning, on the front page of the Waco newspaper, was an article about a gigantic Christmas light display, constructed by a man, Tony Flores, who only has a 6th grade education and who uses 6 electric generators to light up his yard each night.

I found myself with that front page of the Waco Trib in one hand, and with my winnowing fork in my other hand,

Judging this man for this stupid use of his meager income,

Judging him for his lack of understanding for the real reason for the season,

Judging him for his absence of good taste.

Yet, when Jesus comes, with his winnowing fork in his hand,

Jesus will not judge us based upon our educational level or our income level or based upon our good taste.

Jesus will use his winnowing fork and judge us based upon what we do for others.

In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist preaches judgment and the crowd gathers by the Jordan River and asks:

“What then should we do?”

John the Baptist responds by saying:

“Whoever had two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

How many times have I pleaded with God in prayer?

“Oh God, please tell me what to do.”

And, God’s response, through the words of John the Baptist, is that I am not to be as concerned with my *own* salvation and eternal life and forgiveness.

But, my own salvation and eternal life and forgiveness relates to my sharing of my closet full of coats and jackets with those who have none.

My own salvation and eternal life and forgiveness relates to my sharing of the food that I eat in such abundance that I must go to the gym and work it off on the treadmill.

My own salvation and eternal life and forgiveness relates to my behavior toward others.

For, when Jesus comes, his winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his

threshing floor and to separate the self-giving wheat from the selfish chaff.

In Luke's Gospel, the disciples of Jesus ask Jesus:

"Lord, teach us to pray."

And, Jesus responds by saying,

"When you pray, say [this]:

Our Father, who art in heaven...

Forgive us our trespasses as *we forgive* those who trespass against *us*."¹

Also in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says to us:

"Do not judge, and *you* will not be judged."²

My friends, this is the good news that John the Baptist preaches on the banks of the Jordan River:

Christianity is *not* a private religion that is between me and my God. Christianity is a religion that is about our relationship with God, *and* about our relationships with each other.

In one week, we celebrate Christmas,

The coming of the man named Jesus, whom John the Baptist announces will come with his winnowing fork in his hand, to rake away the selfish leaves in our yard and to separate the good wheat from the chaff.

We celebrate the coming of Jesus, who will not judge us based upon our empty piety or our showy liturgy or tacky light displays.

We celebrate the coming of Jesus, who will forgive us, as we have forgiven others.

And, who *will* judge us, as we have judged others.

AMEN.

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¹ See Luke 11: 1-4

² Luke 6: 37