

Seeking Authenticity
Matthew 3:2-11
December 16, 2007

The Mitchell Report issued last week confirmed the evidence of steroid abuse in Major League Baseball. Eighty five players are named as having used performance-enhancing drugs. The report calls the pervasiveness of the drug culture “a serious threat to the integrity of the game.”ⁱ Underlying the investigation are questions of ethics and honor. Are you for real? Are you who you say you are? Are you genuine or have you inflated your innate ability to play baseball? Do you have the integrity of Hank Aaron who hit 755 home runs on his own power?

John asks a similar question of Jesus. Two years after he baptized Jesus, John is in prison. John has been hearing about Jesus, but what he hears is not what he expected. John has given his life to preparing the way for the Messiah. He was certain that Jesus was the one called by God for this task. But now John is troubled, for what Jesus is doing is not what John anticipated. Jesus’ ministry focuses on celebrating God’s reign as it is slowly dawning in the world. John and others had expected the Messiah to facilitate a dramatic purge of oppression and injustice, clearing the way for the God of justice to conquer the world and reign supreme. John feels let down by his cousin. Jesus doesn’t seem to be the real Messiah after all.

Can we not relate to John’s sense of frustration? Haven’t there been times when we prayed to God, but our prayers weren’t answered in the specific way we requested? Have we ever expected God to miraculously straighten out the messes of our lives and make everything perfect? Have we ever given up on God and decided we could handle things better ourselves? If so, we can resonate with John’s disappointment in Jesus.

John sends his disciples out to seek evidence. Jesus reminds John’s disciples of the prophet Isaiah’s description of the messianic age. It will be a time when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” Jesus places the emphasis on acts of deliverance rather than acts of judgment against the unrighteous. Jesus puts his energy into positive deeds that change lives, rather than in direct destruction of those things that diminish life.

He teaches others how to direct their energies in such life-giving ways. Instead of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” Jesus says, “Don’t hit back.” If someone sues you for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. Others had taught, “Love your friend; Hate your

enemy.” Jesus says, “Love your enemies; let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.”ⁱⁱ

When John’s disciples come seeking evidence from Jesus, he instructs them to report what they hear and see themselves from Jesus. Tell John what Jesus teaches about this radical new way of treating others. Share with him the ways in which people are being made whole. It may not be what John and others expected, but it is what God is doing. Jesus lets his words and actions speak for themselves. He doesn’t directly claim the title of Messiah, but he is living out of his God-created identity. He is true to the call of God.

It’s like the fellow who was accosted by a street evangelist and asked, “Are you a Christian?” The man thoughtfully replied, “Why are you asking me? I could tell you anything. Ask my family. Talk with my neighbors. Speak to the folk with whom I work. THEY can tell you whether or not I am a Christian.”

Last week in some internet research I discovered that the online Merriam-Webster dictionary invited visitors to their web site to vote for the word of the year for 2007. Voters chose from 20 words most frequently looked up and the most popular submissions to the Open Dictionary. Three of the words in the top ten list were hypocrite, charlatan, and Pecksniffian, meaning unctuously hypocritical. This was not a scientific survey, but I find the common thread of meaning in these words curious. Is our society seeking greater authenticity from our fellow human beings? Are we growing weary of those who put on false appearances or who are frauds?

Jesus’ actions prove that he is not just talking the talk; he is walking the walk. His deeds demonstrate that he is really real, not fake real. He is the Authentic Messiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus then gives credit to John the Baptist for his own authenticity. John is not a royal palace advisor wearing soft robes and condoning the status quo. John is a prophet of God, wearing rustic clothes and eating natural foods, living off what God provides, not what was coerced from the poor. John is faithful to the call of previous prophets, serving as a refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap. The role of the prophet is to provide a social commentary on current conditions and advocate God’s alternative vision for society. John fulfills his role with integrity, without any political spin. People flock to hear the message of truth and vision of hope John preaches. Jesus affirms John as an Authentic Messenger.

Jesus goes on to say that regardless of John’s greatness, there are others, even the lowliest persons in the realm of God who follow Jesus and will surpass John in greatness. Jesus is looking for Authentic Disciples who will exceed John in faithfulness and effectiveness. He is looking for those who have a larger purpose to their lives. Whole Foods Market is the world’s largest retailer of natural and organic foods. Part of its popularity comes from the sense that its

profit-making is a byproduct of a larger purpose – to “change the way the world eats.” Authentic Disciples look beyond their own interests and focus on the interests of Jesus. They unequivocally align themselves with Jesus and his distinctive, even radical, way of life. In authentic disciples, people see congruence between their words and actions. They walk the talk.

Christmas is a celebration of the incarnation, of the Word of God becoming Flesh and dwelling among us. Lest we be deemed hypocrites, if we celebrate Christmas, we must also embody the Word of God in our lives, talking the words of Jesus to heart, emulating his lifestyle, using our energy in positive life-giving ways.

Robert Fulghum has written a piece called, “Christmas List Eating.”

I usually draw up a heavy duty Things To Do list about this time of year.

I am black belt at lists. I even have lists of lists.

Seven pages of expectations that are in themselves enough to permanently destroy the spirit of Christmas.

But this year I started from somewhere else in my mind.

New list.

One page.

A Things To Be list.

Concentrating on the feelings I wanted to have,

The condition of mind and spirit I yearned for,

The quality of life I wanted to manifest,

The vibrations of life I wanted to give off to other people.

A Things To Be list for Christmas.

Then I boiled the list down into one word.

Ant hen I wrote that word on a tiny piece of paper.

And then I wrapped that tiny piece of paper around a small candy cane.

And ate it.

List and all.

SHAZAM! HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING!...

I suppose you want to know what the one word was.

Nope. You got to work it out for yourself.

Like Christmas.

Cause if it ain't inside you somewhere, all the lists in the world won't make it happen.

Here, have a candy cane on me.^{iv}

Think about it for a moment: What one word describes what you want to be? What word captures the essence of your personal vision? Chew on that word. Digest that word. Hide it somewhere deep within so that it will grow.

When people see us, will they recognize the word we have chosen? Are our actions congruent with our visions of ourselves? Are our lives integrated with our values? Are we really who we want to be? Are we authentic?

Jesus is the authentic revelation of God. May we be bold to be authentic disciples of Jesus Christ.

ⁱ *Contra Costa Times*, Friday, December 14, 2007, p. A1.

ⁱⁱ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), p. 1753.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Homiletics*, Vol. 19, No. 6, December 2007.

^{iv} Robert Fulghum, *Christmas Friarworks*, Morningstar Press, 1981.

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