

Advent 2A 2022

John the Baptist really upset people, especially people in high places.

He did this by teaching others not just to think differently, but to be different.

John knew that people can think however they want with little effect on the *status quo*,
let alone on their spiritual growth.

Gene Sharp, who studied how to topple dictators, noted that autocrats can survive almost
anything but humor.

When people simply stop taking them seriously, see them as ridiculous, they lose their
power.¹

Humor means relating to something without fear.

We no longer feel the need to speak the official truth that divides and allows people to
conquer.

When we start behaving without fear, the positions that are sustained by that fear
collapse.

The kingdom of heaven in which people accept themselves exactly how God made them
therefore undermines power structures because people are no longer afraid to be
themselves, afraid to speak the truth.

I have always enjoyed knowing all kinds of people.

¹ Nicholas Kristof, "Banana Peels for Xi Jinping," *New York Times*, November 30, 2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/30/opinion/china-covid-protests-xi-jinping.html>.

People who have interests and gifts that I lack are interesting to me, yet, when I was young, I learned that there was a great gulf between me and certain others. In high school, for example, I admired those who completely refurbished their cars—new seats, new paint job, new rims, different hood—all done by themselves.

I wanted to challenge that gulf, but never had success.

Years of living in a highly stratified society in which mannerisms, dress, words and grammar, almost everything about a person was a cue about social position had made people's defensive walls high.

I failed to get beyond the walls because I had changed nothing but my thinking.

John encouraged others to relate differently, to establish the kingdom of heaven in which all are respected for their individual gifts.

He was dangerous to the established norms.

For his efforts, he was eventually put to death.

Various excuses were made for his beheading, of course, but ultimately, his ministry was ended because it was beginning to be successful.

I recently watched an eight-part series produced and partially directed by Tim Burton that was based on the character, Wednesday Addams, the unemotional daughter in the Addams Family.

In the series, after calmly approaching the swim team that had bullied her brother and dropping two bags of piranhas in the pool where they were practicing, the teenage Wednesday is sent to a school for outcasts in Jericho, Vermont, a town founded by a Puritan.

There, as well, Wednesday steadfastly refuses to pretend, to try to fit in, to swallow the lies people tell in order to maintain a certain order.

She discovers that the former sheriff and school principal were complicit in covering up injustices.

They claimed they were maintaining order, but the deeper reason was that they wanted to maintain their positions within that order.

They wield their authority much as the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to John to be baptized.

John calls them out, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’”

In other words, do not rely on your heritage to claim righteousness.

Bear fruit that shows that you are different, that you love, that you recognize the indwelling God.

He knows the Pharisees and Sadducees merely want to appropriate the ritual of baptism in order to further justify their status.

For them, in other words, it is simply an additional credential by which to prop up their positions.

For John, on the other hand, baptism is what one does to announce publicly that one has changed, that one now behaves differently, that one no longer values achieving but being.

If we are aware, we sense when someone values achieving.

We do not trust them even when they are on “our team.”

People who wield power know better than to make themselves vulnerable even to their own comrades.

We know them to be whited sepulchers jostling for position with much to hide.

We would become fodder for their egos, stepping stones for their advancement.

The game, you see, traps even those who are most successful at it.

Only with a person who values how we *be* in the world can we safely allow ourselves to be ourselves.

This is why Christ does not chat with Pilate, does not acquiesce to Herod’s request that he do a miracle.

It would only further validate their power.

Two millennia later, Wednesday finds herself facing the same attitudes as she deals with the legacy of the Puritans in Jericho.

In contrast with those around her, she embraces the darkness within her, her full self, but uses it to fight lies and injustice.

This is a common theme in Tim Burton's movies, where the people who succeed in looking "normal" are the ones who are malicious.

Edward Scissorhands, for example, has a tender heart whereas the people in town commit private cruelties in order to maintain a place in the hierarchy.

We can spend so much time denying our uniqueness that we not only forget who *we* are, but forget what *truth* is.

Truth becomes what everyone agrees to believe.

If we then threaten to reveal the false reality behind that "truth," we are a threat.

Wednesday encounters the lie that the townspeople are normal and good and the outcasts are evil and untrustworthy, but she is determined to reveal the truth about both the town and the school, neither of which is perfect.

She discovers, for example, an unholy alliance between the principal and the former sheriff, just like between the Herodians, who were in favor of Greek culture, and the Pharisees, who bitterly opposed it.

They were able nevertheless to unite long enough to crucify Jesus.

People might say that it was a case of the enemy of my enemy is my friend, but I would say it is simply an example of how those who do not care about truth, but only power, can justify anything.

John's refusal to allow baptism to be coopted by the elite, his refusal to play the game, threatens the status quo.

Like John, Wednesday brings her genuine self to each encounter.

It is exaggerated for effect, of course.

At one point, she explains, "I try to act like I don't care that everyone hates me, but deep down inside, I really enjoy it."

Later, however, she admits to her popular rival at the school, "I secretly wish I cared more about what others think."

She wishes, in other words, that she could allow herself to be vulnerable, to make friends, to receive a hug.

She, too, is not perfect, but she knows how to marshal her strengths and imperfections on behalf of what is right.

Wednesday is able to embrace her full self, and that is what makes her a formidable enemy.

She cannot be intimidated into obedience to a lie because she does not care what others think.

She acts repeatedly out of compassion, moreover, because it is easy for her to identify with those who allow it, since she knows that we all have our own darkness and failings.

Repentance begins with embracing ourselves, the fullness of our being as God created us, with recognizing that any strengths that we have are merely the positive side of some weakness.

When we do so, we lose our reliance on power and position and open ourselves up to real change, open ourselves up to truth, open ourselves up to loving and being loved.

John invited those who had made this change to a public recognition in the form of baptism.

We, the baptized, have sworn to live out of our authentic selves, to resist injustice, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to respect the dignity of every human being, all of which sets on edge the status quo.