

There is a Far Side cartoon in which the cowboys are fearful of the Indians living around them. So they literally circle the wagons. They put all of their wagons in a circle so that they are on the inside and they can protect themselves from the forces of danger outside of themselves. These cowboys feel safe inside the circle of wagons. However, in this cartoon, several of the cowboys inside the wagons have Indian headdresses sticking out from under their cowboy hats. The danger for these cowboys is not outside the circled wagons where they think the danger lies. Their danger lies within.

Many of us who call ourselves Christians think like the cowboys in this cartoon. We think that the purpose of the Christian faith is to circle the wagons and protect ourselves from the dangerous forces outside. We think that the purpose of our faith is to get enough people on the inside of the wagons that we can have a big enough force to support and comfort one another from the evil forces outside of the wagons.

We think that we can have a pure center where we all think alike and have the same thoughts and opinions and that we can be the righteous and faithful core. It is the hope that if we just hang in there long enough then the forces outside of us will disappear and then we can eventually move west again. Many Christians really want to be Amish.

I read of someone who recently went on a family vacation to Virginia. They were standing in line at Monticello when their family noticed an Amish family in the tour group. The Amish family had traditional Amish conservative dress and haircuts. The father had a long flowing white beard but as this middle class American family looked a little closer, they noticed something about this family that just didn't seem to fit with their stereotype of Amish families. The entire Amish family was wearing black Nike tennis shoes and the boy was head bobbing to an iPod. It was apparent that his musical choice was not some church approved gospel but more likely a rapper like P Diddy or Green Day.

If it is our hope to become a tight knit group of Christians inside of circled wagons, then the evangelist known as John the Baptist has something to say to us. “You brood of vipers. You collection of snakes. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Do not say, “Well we have Abraham as our ancestor;” for I tell you that God is able to raise up children of Abraham from stones.” And then God gives those who want to remain on the inside of the covered wagons these words of judgment, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

If we see the purpose of Christianity to circle the wagons and to protect ourselves from the dangers and real world problems, then we are a part of that group that John refers to as a brood of vipers. And any faith community that hangs out inside the circled wagons is the type of group that John warns will be cut down because it does not bear good fruit and it will be thrown into the fire. And like in the Far Side cartoon, finding safety inside the circled wagons is really just an illusion anyway.

John’s words of judgment do not rest upon those outside of the faith. John’s words of judgment rest upon those inside the faith who are circling the wagons and trying to live inside.

When you have been hurt and when you have been defeated and when things change and you don’t understand what is happening, it is natural to want to circle the wagons and live inside of them. When we have enough problems of our own, we don’t want to come to terms with the lives of people like Ronny Dude’.

Ronnie was someone who was described as a man in an adult body but had the mind and emotional makeup of a boy. Ronnie would show up in the Open Door soup kitchen in Atlanta to receive a free meal that he could not afford otherwise. The volunteers in that soup kitchen were able to coax Ronnie to telling them how he ended up at that soup kitchen. They learned that he was born in South Dakota.

He lived in South Dakota with his family for the first 6 years of his life. But when Ronnie was 6 years old, his family went on a family trip. Imagine with me, one of the kindergartners or first graders in this church or in your community going on a trip with their family. Driving south, they came into downtown Atlanta. On an unfamiliar street in this unfamiliar city, the family stopped the car, put Ronnie out onto the sidewalk, and drove away. He never saw his family again.

6 years old and alone, Ronnie had to figure out a way to live on the streets of Atlanta, Georgia. Ronnie died in 2001 as a result of alcohol poisoning. He drank himself to death to try to cover over the memories of a life of pain.

Is the Christian faith about circling the wagons and protecting ourselves from the dangers outside? John the Baptist says that a life of faith is something quite different. In fact, the crowds that John is addressing ask him, "What then should we do? If we aren't supposed to circle the wagons, how are we to live our life?"

John says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none." Why did this church just have a coat drive? We had a coat drive in which our second coats were brought in because that is what John the Baptist demands of us if we are to be people of faith." Why do we have a box that remains at our entrance? We keep this box at our entrance and Dale continues to stand up in worship and remind us about the needs of PATH because that is what John reminds us to do. If we have extra food, we give it away. Why do we have an angel tree? Because we share presents to show children and youth that there is grace in this world. We don't hoard, but share with those who do not have.

John had tax collectors who came up to him and asked him what they are to do to live a life of faithful obedience. John tells them that they are to collect no more than what they are supposed to. So, therefore, why are we called to be honest where we work or volunteer? If we are working in industry, whatever that industry is, we treat people fairly. If we volunteer our time in the community, we do so with integrity.

We do not take advantage of people or situations. We do not keep money that is not ours to keep and we do not cheat people in any way. Why do we do this? Because John the Baptist tells us that this is the way we are live our life of faithful obedience to God.

What else do people ask John about? Some soldiers come up to John and ask him what they are to do? John tells them that they are not to use their power or military might to extort from others.

John's words are a very important reminder to all of us that the Christian faith is not about coming into a safe sanctuary and feeling protected from the world outside the wagons. God can raise up Christians from the stones in the ground.

A few weeks ago in a church in Seattle, some men gathered for breakfast. The men were muttering about how Christmas costs too much. Someone else bemoaned how the bills show up in January. Someone else lamented that Christmas is just too materialistic. But then Floyd spoke up. Floyd was wearing a red bow tie and sitting behind his walker. From his deformed mouth Floyd shared, "you know, my wife and I were married for thirty years and couldn't have children. So we raised 72 foster children." The men sat there in silence. And then these men started asking themselves, "What can I do to live out my faith like Floyd?"

Sanctuaries are not places to circle wagons. But instead this is a place where we gather to receive our guidance, orders if you will, to care for the needs of others, provide for those that do not have, and conduct ourselves morally in our dealings with others.

So now our question is this: What are you going to do? AMEN.

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-Amish story from Halter, Hugh & Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, Jossey-Bass, 2008, p. 31

-Hospitality, Nov/Dec 2009, Open Door Community, Atlanta, GA.

-Text: Luke 3: 7-18

-Given: December 13, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)