



The Questions of Christmas:
“ARE YOU THE ONE?”

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Scripture: Matthew 11:2-6

When John (the Baptist) heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

What was our world like fifty years ago? How many of you were alive in 1965?

- The first US combat troops arrived in Vietnam.
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and more than 2,600 others were arrested in Selma, Alabama during demonstrations against voter-registration rules.
- Unemployment was 5.2%.
- The cost of a first class stamp was five cents.
- Inflation was 1.59%.
- Gas was 31 cents a gallon.
- The average cost of a new home was \$13,600.
- Twelve tornadoes touched down and raced across Michigan on Palm Sunday, April 11, killing 53 people and injuring 800. How many of you remember the tornadoes?
- *The Sound of Music* premiered.
- Cool Whip, Spaghetti O's, Pampers and the Pillsbury Doughboy were introduced.
- And most important of all, Alabama and Michigan State were the NCAA football champions! How about that? Go, State!

In 1965, our country was prosperous. The world was at our fingertips. A can-do spirit of optimism pervaded America. New gadgets and machines were invented daily. The choices seemed endless. Today, however, we look back at 1965 and say, “Wow! Were we primitive!” No video games or iPods. No computers, tablets, Internet or cell phones. No online shopping. We really didn't have much to choose from fifty years ago, did we?

In 2004 Barry Schwartz published a book called *The Paradox of Choice; Why More is Less*. In the book, Schwartz described the inventory of his local supermarket. He found 85 varieties of crackers, 285 different cookies, 230 soups, 120 pasta sauces and 175 different salad dressings.

In 2004, a typical supermarket carried over 30,000 items.¹ In 2014, the number of items the average supermarket carried rose to 42,214.

Schwartz's thesis is that while some choice is necessary and good, too many options, too many decisions, can be debilitating. Beyond a certain point, choices are paralyzing. I think that's why I dislike shopping so much. I honestly can't deal with the over-stimulation. I become overwhelmed very quickly, so when the bagger in the grocery store asks me, "Paper or plastic?" I freeze. I have to make so many weighty decisions in other areas of my life that the paper or plastic question just about puts me over the edge!

So here we are in Advent, where the choices and questions are staring us right in the face. Is this the right gift for my mother? How many different cookies should I bake this year? Does that color look right with this decoration? Should we ask Uncle Tony over for Christmas dinner this year? Can we afford that? Which one of the hundreds of trees here should we buy? In the midst of all the choices we face at Christmas, how do we know that underneath all this stuff, Jesus is the One?

John the Baptist and Jesus were the same age, and their mothers were related, but we don't know how close the boys were growing up. What we do know is that Mary and Elizabeth spent several months together when they were both pregnant. John was a Jewish prophet, but he was also a marginal kind of guy, suddenly entering our world, looking a bit like Elijah of old. It was a shock to see him. John's ragged, rugged clothing separated him from royalty, as well as the food he ate, namely locusts; yes, the insects, not the pods of the locust tree. Who would have ever thought it would be John to herald Jesus' appearance on the scene?

John's ministry was distinguished by his practice of baptism for the repentance of sins so that the Jews could be ready for the Messiah. Whereas John baptized with water, a symbol of judgment and purification, John proclaimed that the one coming after him would baptize with fire and would therefore accomplish the judgment itself.

John already knew himself to be subordinate to the Messiah, not even worthy to carry his sandals. John's self-proclaimed role was to usher in God's kingdom, to prepare the way for the Messiah. Somehow, John knew that Jesus was the One, for when Jesus came to be baptized by John in the Jordan River, John said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John made the clear choice to be used by God as a messenger even when he didn't fully understand the nature of the Messiah he was proclaiming.

If John were alive today, I sometimes wonder if he would have so clearly known that Jesus was the One amid the myriad of choices available to him. Barry Schwartz says in his book that when it comes to making decisions, there are two types of people. Most of the time I am what Barry Schwartz calls a "satisficer." Satisficers are often paralyzed by all the options. So they are satisfied and willing to live with "good enough" rather than insisting on the best. Satisficers often say, "Just buy it, be done with it, get out of the store and go home." That's me as far as shopping goes.

Other people are what Schwartz calls “maximizers.” Maximizers do their research and think long and hard about every decision. Gary is more of a maximizer. Maximizers tend to make objectively better decisions than satisficers do, but Schwartz claims they’re often less satisfied with their choices. Most of us are somewhere in the middle between satisficers and maximizers.

Certainly, our choices are not only at the stores in the mall, and nor are they only present during Advent. We have choices in our spiritual life as well. For example, you are free to worship at any church you wish within a reasonable driving distance of your home. By contrast, people fifty years ago were very loyal to their church. No one ever heard of church shopping. You went to the closest church of your denomination and stayed there the rest of your life. My parents were like that. Like all churches, my home church has had ups and downs over the years, but my parents were “satisficers” as far as church goes. It was good enough.

Today, however, “good enough” is not always good enough for a church to survive and thrive because most people today are “religious maximizers.” They want to find just the right church to fulfill their needs, and it doesn’t matter if it’s a United Methodist Church or not. Unfortunately, maximizers soon realize that the church they so carefully pick is not perfect, either, so they can tend to move on and continue their never-ending quest.

I suspect that John the Baptist was a maximizer, because out of all the choices of leaders to follow in the first century, John somehow knew that his role was to prepare the way for the Messiah. ***And he believed Jesus was the One.***

Well...but then John had some second thoughts, which is what maximizers can tend to do. In chapter 11, we find John in prison because his preaching rubbed the authorities the wrong way. Actually, John criticized King Herod for marrying his brother’s wife. Not smart.

From prison John hears about the deeds of Jesus, his miracles and acts of compassion and how Jesus’ disciples are given the power to heal and cure diseases. John now begins to wonder if the king whose advent he heralded is, in fact, the Messiah. I can just imagine John thinking, “Wait a minute! The things Jesus is doing don’t jive with the fiery judgment I predicted. What’s up with that?”

We know for a fact that Jesus did not conform to John’s expectations of the Messiah. John was looking for a violent, eschatological judge. So, in our scripture for today, John is backing off from his previous confidence and wonders if perhaps he made the wrong choice. He has his disciples ask Jesus, “Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus tells John’s disciples, “Go and tell John what you see. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Jesus, indeed, is the One, but he’s not what anyone expects. In the act of becoming the Messiah, Jesus changes who the Messiah is, and John, of course, doesn’t get it.

Are you ever tempted to test Jesus against your own criteria? Are you ever tempted to ask Jesus at this time of year, “Are you the one who is coming, or should I wait for another?” Do you ever doubt when you look at the violence, terrorism and war in our world and don’t see Jesus doing

anything about it? Do you ever question whether the way of gentleness and non-retaliation will ever work? Do you ever think about all the starving children on this earth, people who are unemployed and those without health insurance and ask, “Does God care at all?” Jesus, are you the One? If you are, then get with the program and save the world, or I might have to look for another because I’ve got a lot of other choices.

It’s okay to ask the questions. It’s good to wrestle like John did. It’s all part of our faith journey. I believe that the answer to the question, “Are you the one?” can be found by looking at the gospel as a whole: the miracles, the teaching about loving one’s enemies, Jesus’ insistence on accepting all people as valued children of God and forming his disciples into a community of love, caring and reaching out. This is the answer to the question, “Are you the One?” There is no other who can provide peace in the midst of suffering, serenity in the midst of trials, fulfillment in sacrifice, contentment in plenty or in want, and joy in reaching out to all people.

But I don’t think we can ever really be satisfied by simply accepting that Jesus is the One. **The real question for each one of us today is, “Am I the one?”** Am I the one God calls to help the blind receive their sight, the lame to walk and the poor to have good news brought to them? Am I the one God calls to be a merciful presence in the midst of a sad and violent world? Am I the one to claim that perfect love casts out all fear? Am I the one to liberate the oppressed and work for justice? Am I the one to accept all people as God’s precious children? Am I the one to get with the program and save the world?

That may be the most important choice facing you right now. It’s easy to be a satisficer at Christmas, to say: oh well, I can give this little bit to the church or others, but my primary obligation is to take care of my family at Christmas. That’s good enough. It’s also easy to be a maximizer, to be so enamored with all the choices, the alternatives, that we never get around to discerning God’s will for us at Christmas. Or we can be somewhere in between. We don’t have to be so paralyzed by the choices that we settle for less than who we can become. Nor do we have to be so taken with the choices that we never make any decisions and miss God’s call.

Perhaps, in the midst of all the choices, we can simply decide that some things are non-negotiable this Advent. Non-negotiable is that I will not be seduced by what is going on around me in the secular culture. Non-negotiable is that my primary focus at Christmas will not be on me. Non-negotiable is that my family will find a way to reach out to someone who is in need this month. Non-negotiable is that I will feed the hungry, welcome the stranger and contribute toward mission. Non-negotiable is that I will focus inward on my relationship with Christ and outward on my responsibility to bring light to this world. Non-negotiable is that God calls me to be the one.

In that sense, 2015 is no different than 1965 or the year John the Baptist was in prison. The choice is the same. “Are you the One?” John asked Jesus. And Jesus replies, “I can only be the one when you choose to be the one.” ***Will you be the one this Advent?***

1. Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice; Why More is Less*, New York, HarperCollins., referred to in “Burden of Choice,” R. Stephen Warner, *Christian Century*, July 13, 2004.