Are we willing to change?

What a personality John must have been! Imagine people from all over coming to hear his message of repentance, that is, of looking again at life and letting oneself be changed by that look! They came to him with, “What must I do?” They begged for homework! John knew his people well enough to assign them the right kind of homework, one that would reward their work of repentance.

For those of us wondering “what’s God’s will for us?,” we can’t go wrong by focusing on what leads to Social Justice. Social Justice, social right-relationship, is a triangle. One point of the triangle is Advocacy, a 2nd is Direct Service and the 3rd, Empowerment. Few of us are good at all 3. However, God is calling us just as we are to do at least one of them.

Perhaps you like to serve the poor directly: feeding them, clothing them, housing them. Perhaps you like being the voice of the voiceless, or defending the defenseless. You can speak for them through community organizations like PACT or the Interfaith Committee for Economic and Social Justice. Finally, you might be good at helping people fend for themselves. Our employment center, our counseling center, our resource or housing center is for you. Or, perhaps you can help our principal market our schools, one of the best-kept secrets in our area.

John the Baptist helped his people understand what to do by saying what St. Ignatius tells us Jesuits to do when we find our way of doing things turning out badly: “Do the opposite.” John told those who had realized that his preaching made them feel like changing, to change by doing the opposite of what they had been doing.

So I’ve been asking myself, if President Obamma, Congress, our city officials and business leaders were to ask John the same question today, what would John’s answer be? He’d say, “You who espouse family values, reform your Immigration policy to keep families together.”
“You, who duped the poor or unsuspecting into signing mortgages that were wrong to be offered, pay back what you stole and modify the loans to keep families in their houses. You, who use the law to write “fine-print” contracts, write contracts that are easy to understand and follow. You, who consider yourselves the police of the world, stop bullying and find a way to peace. You, who are helping to destroy the earth that God created and loves, sign the World Environment Summit accords, and stop global-warming.”

We can go on and on, but you get the point. We are all included in those admonitions because how we speak out or not, shows whether we’re part of the problem or part of the solution. Advent is a time to consider being part of the solutions to human problems.

Advent is time to ask ourselves, “What must I do to be a better person in 2013?” Once we identify the areas to be improved, we must ask for the grace to change what we can change. And, trusting we’ve received the grace we asked for, act on it. Don’t let it be returned like the gifts we don’t like. Real repentance, the process of re-looking at life and letting ourselves be changed by that re-look, will act. Otherwise we’ll be like one who always says “I’m sorry,” after doing wrong, and then goes on repeating the same wrong. There’s no real sorrow, only a bad habit.

We heard Paul say, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near.” (Phil 4:4-5) That’s the message behind the pink Advent-candle and vestments. Today is Gaudete Sunday, meaning Rejoicing Sunday. It is an attempt to keep us hopeful while we prepare our hearts to be mangers for Christ.

When we come to communion today, let our hands become a manger for the host, symbolic of converting our hearts into mangers for Christ, too. May we leave here resolved to do what John the Baptist or Christ has told us to do: change for the better.