



THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
JANUARY 19, 2020
“WHO ARE YOU MADE OF”

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

SERMON

I was looking around in the basement this week and came across this small wooden box that contained three eggs and 100 one dollar bills.

I asked Deb about it and she confessed that over the years she put an egg in the box each time I preached a particularly poor sermon.

I thought “this isn’t bad for all the years I’ve been preaching—three bad sermons.”

But, what about the 100 one dollar bills?

Deb hemmed and hawwed and finally said that each time she got a dozen eggs, she sold them at the farmer’s market for a dollar....



Despite many failures, my goal in preaching is to help us connect the life and teachings of Jesus to our own lives.

Because what does it matter what happens to Jesus if it does not happen to us?

What does it matter unless Jesus' life reveals something to us about our lives?

Jesus is meant to be the pattern by which we see our lives. The pattern by which we recognize our already present relationship with god.

For me, the best way to do this is by good theology and good psychology. The study of god in Jesus connected to the study of psyche or soul. Soul relates to depth and death. Soul relates to experience and interpretation. Soul relates to suffering and love.

Or we might say, psychotherapy is what god has been secretly doing through by ages under different names. That god searches through our personal history in order to heal what needs to be healed.

This morning, we hear of the three temptations of Jesus, which outline the three ongoing "tempting issues" we have to address throughout lives....

The current pope made a great comment. He suggests that the petition "lead us not into temptation" in the Lord's Prayer would be better translated "let us not fall into temptation." Another translation might be "let's not put ourselves in a situation where we will be tempted."

"Lead us not into temptation" sounds like this is exactly what god wants to do, but maybe we can head him off with enough prayers. A kinda "give me a break, god. Nail someone else."

Instead, if you have trouble with lust, don't go to a gentleman's club. If you have trouble with alcohol, don't hang out in bars and buy a case of beer for the weekend. If you are tempted by money, don't become treasurer of the little league funds.

In a more universal way, the three temptations of Jesus have to do with three basic human needs.

The need for safety and security

The need for affection and esteem

The need for power and control

And all these are critical for our health and well-being.



One way to think about sin in an everyday context is that all of us experience some level of deprivation in regard to these basic human needs and, more often than not, we are wounded pretty seriously in one of the three areas.

Father Thomas Keating writes beautifully about all this and we can use his insight as our organizing theme: “we are kept from the experience of spirit because our inner world is cluttered with past traumas. As we begin to clear away this clutter, the energy of divine light and love begins to flow through us....”

So, this is our lifelong spiritual work. Buying into getting more safety and security, more affection and approval, more power and control creates false emotional programs for happiness. And they take us farther away from god....

Let’s look at the three temptations.

Jesus has fasted for forty days and night. Let’s remember that forty is a biblical number for a heck of a long time. And he is hungry.

So, here is the need for safety and security. We all have the basic human need for enough food each day, a roof over our head, clothes on our backs, and enough money for what is necessary to live without anxiety.

And the temptation is to exercise the ability to turn stones into bread. That is, in the face of the anxiety of not having enough, we work to get all we want any time we want it.

In the face of thinking we do not have enough, we can be seduced into thinking that there is not enough to go around. Or we can try to make sure we always have enough of everything.

Don’t just have a lock on the door. Have an alarm system. And a gun ready in your nightstand. And a big mean dog.

Don’t just have a refrigerator. Two freezers. And a walk-in pantry. And be sure to go to the all-you-can-eat buffet twice a week and when you go to that wedding reception, take home a doggie bag.

Don’t talk to strangers. Or anyone who looks different from you. Watch out for all the people who are just waiting to take advantage of you.

In response, Jesus says, “we don’t live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of god.”

Here, the old religious word is repent. That is, go in the opposite direction of your wound. Practice seeing the ways that god provides enough throughout the creation. Resist the culture that wants us to continually consume more and more of everything. Begin to more



deeply experience the nourishing word of god. Because our hearts are restless until they rest in god.

The process of repenting is similar to working on an old house. The first house I bought and restored had some built-in cabinets. The edging on the counter was black. But one day I used a bit of polish and underneath was brass. So, it is when we clean up the inner clutter. We reveal the presence of god who was there all along....

As I think about these temptations, I find a communal thread. That is, what St. Paul calls principalities and powers want to create the illusion that there is not enough to go around, that we all need more and more of everything to be safe and secure, that we need to just watch out for our own.

And so, as followers of Jesus we can work to ensure that people who are legitimately hungry, without enough to get by are taken care of. We become the bread makers for the kingdom of god.

The second temptation is for Jesus to throw himself off the temple roof to show that the angels will take care of him.

This is the need for affection and approval. That Jesus is so well-loved by the universe that nothing harmful can befall him.

The need for ongoing affection and approval is my wound. To be loved by everyone. But, I can tell you that CLC has cured me of this desire!

When a multitude of members leave the congregation, citing me as the reason, then my need for affection and approval is thoroughly dismantled.

And you know what? I survived and am still standing.

As a younger pastor, anyone's disapproval could torture me. During a sermon, I could have the attention of everyone but that one guy in the back reading his bulletin the entire time and I would find myself focusing on no one but him, tormented because I couldn't hold his attention.

Whether or not this is your primary wound, none of us are going to be loved in all the ways we want to be loved.

We can try to make everybody around us happy and make ourselves miserable. Because they won't be.

We can lose ourselves trying to please others. Giving ourselves away and finding ourselves empty.



As young adults, we can look for love in all the wrong places, thinking that this one will finally be the one.

Jesus' reply to this temptation is "do not put the lord god to the test."

Repenting, going in the opposite direction, can mean something like "grow up!"

Because if Jesus is not special enough in god the father's eyes to be saved, where does that leave us?

Or, as my father used to say, the world does not revolve around your rear-end.

God does loves us as he loved Jesus, but terrible things can still happen to us. God is not the magician to save us from ourselves.

The communal aspect of this temptation suggests to me that

Family has to be bigger than the nuclear family. Family can drive us nuts. Love us, but cause us difficulty.

We all must plant ourselves in a larger community where we can be seen by others who are not invested in getting something from us. Where we love one another even though we don't know one another all that well. Where we love those around us just because they are human beings.

Where we work to include those who are different from us. Here is love. Extending ourselves for those who aren't like us...

The third temptation has to do with power and control. Jesus can rule the world if he will only worship the evil one.

I don't know if Satan saved the worst for last, but misusing power and control seems to be destroying the world.

The wound here is to our autonomy—our capacity to decide and act for ourselves. Parents can wound children by not giving them more and more freedom to make their own decisions as they get older.

A wise family counselor once said that the troubled adolescents he saw all had parents who continued to treat them as younger than they actually were. We all rebel against too much control and power over us.

And what I have seen in unhealthy congregations is those who have little control and power in their personal and professional lives love to try to exert power and control in the congregation, most often causing conflict.



How much damage do we do to others trying to control their behavior? Trying to control our environment.

And in the world, those who have power over critically important issues can exert control so that the solutions put forward benefit the few.

What has happened to working for the common good? What has happened to the notion of being stewards of the world? We have turned the world into a narcissistic playground where all is used for our consumption, while forests burn, species become extinct, refugees flee from life-threatening governmental regimes, and time runs out for all of us.

In the face of the desire for more: safety and security, approval and affection, power and control, we can move in the opposite direction in our personal and communal lives.

All three temptations are false emotional programs for happiness. The healing move, psychologically, is to move our focus from out there—food and possessions, affection and approval from others, power over others—to our own inner life and our relationship with god. That centered place where our deepest self and god meet in harmony.

Our work in following Jesus is sweeping clean the debris of misguided emotional programs for happiness so that what is revealed is the beauty of our true selves and the peace of god within.

SERMON SONG

Way Down in the Hole by Tom Waits