

“Choices”

Luke 4:1-13

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Today on this first Sunday of Lent I want to tell you my very favorite Lenten story. I may have told it before, but it's one of those stories worth repeating. Father John Westerhoff, an Episcopalian priest, was guiding a group of children in an Ash Wednesday ritual. The children were asked to write on a piece of paper something they were willing to “give up” for Lent, and then these papers were to be symbolically burned in an Ash Wednesday fire.

One young boy refused to participate and began misbehaving badly. Father Westerhoff took the boy aside to try and find out what was motivating his misbehavior. He discovered the child knew exactly what he should “give up” for Lent—he just didn't want to do it, and the misbehavior was his coping mechanism. It seems the boy hated one of his classmates and they fought constantly. He knew giving up his hate was the Lenten offering he should make, but he simply couldn't bring himself to do it. Finally, the boy said this, “I can't stop hating this year, but what if my Lenten offering would be that I hope by next Lent, I will be ready to give up my hate?” This offering of hope for the future was the boy's contribution to the fire.

During Lent we often hear conversations (usually focusing on chocolate or caffeine) about what we plan to “give up” for Lent. To my way of thinking, Lent is less about sacrifice and more about clutter. It is more about clearing away the things that clutter our lives making us too pre-occupied and busy to pay attention to God's call for us. Lent is about making room for the Spirit to come to us in new and exciting ways. While we spring clean our houses or have church rummage sales, we also clean out the clutter that fills our souls. Lent gives a structured time set aside from our busy schedules to think about important issues.

Lent's forty days, parallel Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. The words of Frederick Buechner that I quoted last Wednesday are worth repeating: “After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.”

The scripture says that Jesus fasted. Fasting was not so much about self-deprecation or punishment but rather a means of seeking clarity of focus and vision. For us to fast might mean abstaining from anything that consumes our attentions so much that our spiritual vision is blurred. Jesus chooses to pay attention to the ministry God has given him to do. He goes into the wilderness where he is not distracted by people or commerce, he chooses to fast from the gathering, preparing, and eating of food, and he chooses to be alone. And it was in this undistracted, uncompromised state of mind that Jesus is tempted. He's given three choices. All three choices strike at the question of who Jesus is.

The first temptation is “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” The second temptation is “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” The third temptation is “All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” We know how Jesus responded to these temptations. But the core of these same questions challenge us today.

The first temptation has to do with bread, the sustenance of life. Jesus does not say that bread is irrelevant; he just says that human beings need more than bread to stay alive. So for us the temptation might pose this question: “Is satisfying our physical needs our first and only priority? Are we more concerned with staying alive at any costs, be it maintaining our physical

comforts, staying financially solvent, or just doing whatever it takes to be in control our destiny? What compromises are we willing to make just to stay alive?

In our news we hear a lot about corporate giants with great power willing to use it to become wealthy even if it means compromising their employees. After Enroll collapsed I remember hearing stories about employees in their 70's who had to go back to work because their retirement savings held in stock vanished. Life is full of compromises; we often must make them. I once heard someone say this, and it has always stuck with me: "We are often judged by the integrity of our compromises." Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by the Word of God." As people of God are we willing to be faithful in order to receive the bread of heaven?

The second temptation has to do with what gives us our self worth, our identity. Jesus was given the choice to be a wonder-worker, to capture the adoration of the crowds by sheer display of miraculous power. Though fewer religious leaders use this miracles today, there are still some, and 1st century Palestine was full of miracle-workers. Although miracles are very much a part of Jesus' ministry, they do not solely define who he is as Son of God. The question for us is will our identities be determined by doing things to capture the praise of the crowds and win a popularity contest? Is our self-worth based on how important we are or how much people love us?

I've struggled with this question. My first call to ministry was as associate pastor of a very large UCC church. My ministry made me feel important. People needed me. And I got satisfaction from being needed. But about three years ago I resigned, believing God was calling me to a new ministry. For months after my resignation, I noticed that so much of my sense of self worth was tied up in that church and in feeling important there. When the people there were no longer around me to affirm my ministry or appreciate things I did, I had to ask myself, what is the essence of Joyce, what is it that gives value to my life?

Another of my favorite Buechner quotes goes like this: "Each of us is a secret that God chooses to reveal." It isn't our high profile jobs or displays of power, beauty, or self-importance that give our lives meaning and worthiness. It is that precious secret within each one of us that our creator God affirms and reveals to the world. It is not just what we do. It is not a Ph.D., or whether we can walk or not, or whether we are rich or poor. It is our being, not our lists of accomplishments. For each of us this divine secret is different partly because our personalities are different and God uses us as we are. The place to which God called Jesus was not jumping off high temples in a single bound but meeting the world's deep spiritual hunger. We are called to do the same.

The third temptation was "All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Who are we going to worship? The Bible talks a whole lot about idolatry. The church talks very little about it. We think of idols as sacred statues, worshipped by people long ago and far away. But idolatry is much more. Idolatry is all that consumes our thinking, feeling, living, and devotion other than that which is holy. To worship is to give ones heart to; idolatry is to give one's heart to something besides God.

One of the things we learn from people who suddenly encounter serious, even life threatening health problems, is to live each day as if it were the last. They have learned from their illness to get their priorities straight. And sometimes they say they're even glad for their illness because each day means so much more to them now.

This season of Lent is a grown up "time out" when we can be still and think our priorities and think about our priorities and think about to whom we will give our hearts. Life is complicated and easy to get caught up in. It's twists and turns distract us from always living purposefully, meaningfully, and faithfully. Yet, for 40 days we are given permission, even encouraged,

to set aside a few minutes each day to answer three questions asked a long time ago. For some of us this spiritual journey of lent may take us to the edge of the wilderness.

Like the little boy in Father Westerhoff's story who could only hope that next year, he'd stop hating; we begin a process of self-examination that may take us well into the future. And that's OK, because we are not alone. For we believe in a God who sent the angels to minister to Jesus; and those angels will minister to us as we care for one another and support each other in our Lenten journey.