

"Tempted to Be Tamed"
A First Sunday in Lent; Matthew 4:1-11
March 5, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. GIVING UP FOR LENT

And, so it begins.....

We began the week looking for the radiance of Christ—in each other—shining out of ourselves. We journeyed mid-week to the altar, to receive ashes on our foreheads—to remind us that from dust we have come and to dust we return.

And, thus, we entered into Lent, with fellowship around a soup supper with other pilgrims, and a journey, now, into the Wilderness with Jesus.

For 40 days or so of going deeper, turning away from what distracts us; pondering that we don't survive on bread, power and material resources alone, but on the sustenance of God.

"What are you giving up for Lent?" the tune resounds throughout the land, and people dig deeper into their souls, seeking for some "tool" to help them find a sense of renewal; a discipline to remind them that Lent, more than any time of year, is a season to reflect on who and whose we are.

We hunger for a more meaningful existence, and we do well to heed this call to our souls to "go into the Wilderness with Jesus." To "engage the journey"—whether we give up chocolate, sweets, alcohol, gossip, technology, the news, or any number of daily habits and addictions that distract.

II. TEMPTED NOT to GIVE UP WHAT WE SHOULD

Jesus' sojourn in to the Wilderness is the roadmap for embarking on this season. Of course, Jesus didn't "observe Lent", and I'm almost certain he didn't give up chocolate or soda! (Lent hadn't been invented yet)

He is driven into the Wilderness "by the devil"—like we are at times by the forces that threaten to consume and obsess us. He is tested and tried—like we are by life's circumstances—in season and out.

Jesus is tempted to make a god out of power, fame and craziness. We are tempted by the same. Whether by the crazy world swirling around us, or the voices inside us that tempt us to "play small"; that we're not good enough, and if just listened to the voices of this world promising power and fame that we'd be great instead of small.

We are tempted to not claim our spiritual gifts and put them to use for good in the world. To lay low; not rock the boat. Not get involved. Tempted to be tamed—silenced, hushed up when God is, in fact, calling us to speak up, stand up, act up.

III. GIVE UP INDIFFERENCE

Lent is a call to "wake up and smell the coffee." To get our ostrich heads out of the sand if we have been buried—by busyness, distractions, hopelessness that our contribution doesn't amount to anything anyway.

Pope Francis puts it well:
"Lent comes providentially to reawaken us, to shake us from our lethargy."

We do that by focusing on two things, I suggest, along with our wise pope: We give up two "habits" for Lent—and I don't mean donuts.

The first is INDIFFERENCE:

If we're going to fast from anything this Lent, Francis suggests that even more than candy or alcohol, we fast from indifference towards others.

"Indifference to our neighbor and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience."

"whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades." He continues that, "We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own."

But when we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded.

"What are you giving up for Lent?" It's a question a lot of people will get these next few days. If you want to change your body, perhaps alcohol and candy is the way to go. But if you want to change your heart, a harder fast is needed. This narrow road is gritty, but it isn't sterile. It will make room in ourselves to experience a love that can make us whole and set us free. Now that's something worth fasting for.

It that sounds "like a nice theory" coming from the Vatican, but you're not sure what it means in everyday life, look around.

Muslim veterans offer to guard Jewish sites across US

Just this week, just on Monday, Feb. 27th, over 20 Jewish Community centers and schools received bomb threats and were put on lock-down. Just one day! And that brought the total for the year of bomb threats and other acts of violence against Jewish communities in less 2 months to 90!

I saw this in the news on Tues. morning and then heard no more about it. I wondered if the general public "missed this"? Or, if it wasn't deemed newsworthy enough? Twenty centers throughout the country with bomb threats to children in one day?

Have we become so numb to so much violence in the news, that that was "just another manic Monday" and we moved on to Tuesday without taking pause?

And the week before, Jewish cemeteries were trashed. Vandalized. Tombstones knocked over; loved ones memories defaced. But even if the news coverage seemed indifferent, some folks were not; and they took action.

Thousands of Muslims, many of them veterans, staged clean up and funding campaigns to help their Jewish neighbors. To repair tombstones; to rebuild their sacred places. Other Muslims came out in droves to offer help of the bodily kind: I'm a Muslim in DC. If your synagogue needs someone to stand guard, I'll stand guard. Islam requires it. This was one of thousands of tweets—by this man and many others.

BETH DWYER

Actively countering indifference is a way of life for some folks and we do well to emulate them. Whenever I even hear the word "indifference" I think of Beth Dwyer. Her whole life motto was "Do something! Get out the vote! Don't just sit by while people are in harm's way."

Countless times she quoted and posted on Facebook the famous saying by Martin Niemöller after the Holocaust:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

We honor Beth's legacy when we take this to heart and really live it. It's a call to rise up, wake up, and recognize our own indifference—wherever it may be lurking

V. GIVE UP A WORLD WITHOUT COLOR

The second thing we most need to give up for Lent is **missing the color**. Seeing the world in black and white. Being oblivious to the incredible variety and nuance in every person, situation and circumstance.

It's a "spiritual discipline" indeed, because it doesn't come naturally. But our Lenten Theme: Colorful Souls is a banner—filled with bright and vibrant colors—to remind us to "give up" the most important temptation—that of dividing everything into for/against, black/white, us/them; our people/those people; our religion vs. their religion.

And instead, to look for the colors! The nuances, the many-hues—in each other; in our various life experiences, in our characters. And I mean characters!

VI. HOMEWORK

A. Counter Indifference:

During the 40 Days of Lent (well, about 35 left now), look each day for *one* thing you can do to *not* show indifference to some person or some situation. How can you stand up, stand with, stand alongside one of the least of these that Jesus commanded us to love and champion?

If I'm going to give you homework, then I make sure I do it too, so I thought about these stories just from this week and how I might respond in a positive way. I remembered that our family has a friend—right here in Chaffee County, who survived the Holocaust. She was 13 years old when her entire family was killed.

She shared her story with me one night in a community memorial service. That grief is still so close to the surface and profound. I'll never forget her face and voice as she spoke of such tragedy.

I thought of how she must feel—this week—as peaceful Jewish community centers are the target of someone's hatred and fear.

How that must bring back, once again, the pain and fear of her own life and family. I'm going to find her address tomorrow and send her a card, just to let her know we are thinking of her especially during this time.

One thing we can do to give up indifference for Lent.

B. Color Posters and Compassion

The second Homework Assignment....(oh no! Not TWO of them!) is to color. To grab a pen, a marker, a colored pencil, and color your heart out. With each other. With someone here at CUCC you don't know. We someone of a whole different generation. To color outside the lines if that works for you!

We have all sorts of coloring posters and pens, and will be putting them out all over the church—on the tables and the walls. You can color any time. You can color in your board meetings; in your bible classes, in Sunday School.

And we will journey to the cross from the Wilderness with Jesus, as we learn about the Stations of the Cross across the generations this season.

You can color while you pray. Sometimes sitting still and staying focused in prayer are a challenge. You need to keep your hands busy to keep your mind quiet. Sometimes you want to just hang out with God but don't know how. Your mind wanders and your body complains.

So, color alone with God; color together with other souls and talk about life. And *look for the colors*; expand the colors of your heart, vision and the world around us.

VII. BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY

If all that homework sounds like to much "work"—remember, we are not left alone in the Wilderness. Angels came to Jesus in his hunger and thirst and struggle. Angels, and a textbook and a model are among us to come and minister to us as well.

Henri Nouwen reminds us to remember the source of our true nourishment for the journey—not bread alone, but the bread of God—our sustenance:

"What does it mean to live in the world with a truly compassionate heart, a heart that remains open to all people at all times? It is very important to realize that compassion is more than sympathy or empathy.

When we are asked to listen to the pains of people and empathize with their suffering, we soon reach our emotional limits. We can listen only for a short time to only a few people. In our society we are bombarded with so much 'news' about human misery that our hearts easily get numbed simply because of overload.

But God's compassionate heart does not have limits. God's heart is greater, infinitely greater, than the human heart. It is that divine heart that God wants to give us so that we can love all people without burning out or becoming numb...

The Holy Spirit of God is given to us so that we can become participants in God's compassion and so reach out to all people at all times with God's heart."

Let us come to the Table to find our hungers filled and our bodies and souls strengthened for the Journey ahead. Amen.