

“Tempted To Be Other Than Ourselves”
C Lent Two; Luke 4:1-13
March 17, 2019; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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Tested by the Devil

4 ¹⁻² Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry.

³ The Devil, playing on his hunger, gave the first test: “Since you’re God’s Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread.”

⁴ Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to really live.”

⁵⁻⁷ For the second test he led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. Then the Devil said, “They’re yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I’m in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they’re yours, the whole works.”

⁸ Jesus refused, again backing his refusal with Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.”

⁹⁻¹¹ For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, “If you are God’s Son, jump. It’s written, isn’t it, that ‘he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; they will catch you; you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone’?”

¹² “Yes,” said Jesus, “and it’s also written, ‘Don’t you dare tempt the Lord your God.’”

¹³ That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.

I. JOURNEYS AND WILDERNESS

Who *are* you? What does *your* “purpose-filled life” look like? What are you called to do, and *be*, through this “one, wild and precious life” you’ve been given? Do you ever wonder? Does it ever seem that your purpose in life changes by the day, and is dictated by the day, and outside forces—good *and* evil? Lately, for many of us, our purpose has been snow and wind mitigation! Of one kind or another! Or illness. Or grief.

I have a friend in Leadville with a burro ranch who spent Tuesday (yes, *before* the latest storm!) –all day long—on his tractor just getting his driveway passable! It seems, sometimes, that the mundane, daily challenges take the whole day and more and are all-consuming, doesn’t it?

At such times, it sure feels like we don't have the *luxury* of thinking much about our purpose, our calling, our life's meaning.

Jesus might have been feeling a *little* that way in the Desert. Not that he was "sand plowing" or trying to clear a path through the rocky, unforgiving terrain. But, that the immediate needs and pangs were crying out like the stones. Feed me! Shelter me! Give me something to drink, for God's sake! How long, oh Lord?! I'm not sure I can *stand* much more of this. I am not worthy, apparently. Or, at least, not as hearty, as strong, as I thought!

And *that's* when the Devil shows up. *Right* when Jesus is at his most vulnerable, most down on or doubting himself, most consumed with immediate, pressing, hounding needs. He can't be spiritual right now, for gosh sakes! Can't be thinking about his vocation at a time like this. Life's purpose?! Hah! I'll think about that tomorrow, after I've dealt with everything in front of me today.

Ever been there?

II. IDENTITY TEST

Karoline Lewis, biblical scholar at Luther Seminary, says this "Who Am I" question, this wondering about calling and purpose, is where Jesus' journey has *profound* connections to ours. For, we are *all* on a vision quest like Jesus—a search for meaning in life—whether we want to admit it, or take the time out of our daily grind to acknowledge it.

She calls it—for Jesus *and* for us, the "Identity Test." That testing the waters of who we are, who we have chosen to be, and most importantly, who *God calls us to be*, and where we are going with our lives.

This is something that doesn't just happen once, for 40 days, in *one* Wilderness Time, but happens again and again—in fact, *every* day! It's a *test* because there's a *temptation* that goes with it, and that temptation is to *not* ask the question of God, "who am I, and what is my identity" but to ask it—overtly or subtly of others. And, to allow others to *answer*! To let ourselves be led and defined by persons and forces outside of our inner core—that sacred place within.

Lewis says: "Others seem to have a better perspective on who you are. They seem quite eager to comment on who you *need* to be. Others seem to have answers for or advice about who you should be. And we have a tendency to put our faith in those others rather than ourselves, rather than God.

Holding on to and having confidence in the truth that is yourself is a full-time job. There is so much that pulls you away from *trusting* in who you are... pulls you away from believing in yourself—so much that pulls you toward those voices that speak only about conformity, generality, and obedience."

Howard Thurman also wisely reminds us:

"There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you

cannot hear it, you will— all of your life— spend your days on the ends of strings that someone else pulls.”

And, it's not just about “who you *are*,” but how you will *live out* your identity. There's a sneaky, insipid dynamic going on here. You see, Satan doesn't question *who* Jesus is—he knows he's the Son of God, but he gets under his skin, and tries to make Jesus question *himself*. And isn't that what those outside voices do to us? “IF you are the Son of God, then.....do some parlor tricks and let's have some bread! IF you are the Son of God, let's see some proof of your power.”

“IF you are a baptized, beloved, Child of God, then why are you struggling so much? Where's your faith?! Aren't you a strong enough Christian to withstand this temptation? Don't you practice what you preach and read the bible and pray and go to church and put your faith into action? Oh, and resist the Devil?”

Lewis says our best defense, like for Jesus, is to *resist*. Not to fall for it, not to *accept* the message of the evil one, who causes us to doubt our true identity. “You are my Beloved Child, created and blessed by My Love— now live like you believe it!” (Love, God)

Lewis gives us a challenge, a Lenten practice a little different than giving up chocolate or wine or computer games. She urges us to look at all those strings that try to puppeteer us and voices that call out to us and make us doubt or forget our true identity, and practice a holy, resilient response—“Just say no!”

“There is no shortage of persons or things on the other side of those strings. And sometimes, we get so used

to this reality that it's nearly impossible to see it, and even more impossible to imagine doing something about it. Perhaps a Lenten discipline this time around could be naming those persons and things who think they have you all figured out, who want you to be someone you are not, whose only true interest in you is how you might benefit them -- and maybe giving up those persons and things for the next few weeks, if you feel like you need to give up something for Lent.

This won't be comfortable. It is easier to manage and meet the expectations and to avoid the ramifications of disappointment. You might not have to end the relationship, but the relationship will change. You might not have to leave the thing behind -- whether that's a job, an institution, an activity -- but how you continue to navigate that thing will change. And yet, it will be worth it -- you just might get your life back.”

III. BEING OURSELVES WITH OUR NEIGHBORS

And then. There's a Step Two. For being true to ourselves has a flip side. When we get very clear that we are called, by God, to *be ourselves*, we can allow others to be themselves. And that is desperately needed right here and now in our entire world.

For, just as we are tempted not to give *ourselves* permission to be authentic, genuine and true, we are tempted—every day—to not give that permission to others—sometimes so subtly we don't even realize we're doing it.

Ever stereotype, categorize or generalize about another person, religion, faith practice or culture? We all have. And we know it. And, the first step toward transformation into the likeness of Christ is to *admit* we do it. I hear it all the time. And, I catch myself doing it all the time.

I'll own that. Just as I'll challenge us all to look inside and answer honestly –through this Lenten Season of reflection. And, I'll say honestly that I have not always challenged sentiments that I know are wrong, perpetuate evil and bring harm. For fear of conflict, upsetting my loved ones or upsetting the status quo.

Standing true to my identity means I cannot be silent when I see and hear things that question or undermine the sacred worth and identity of *any* child of God. You might get tired of hearing this message from me, but I will not cease challenging our assumptions, misnomers and lack of understanding of others who might be different from us.

Let's face it: Stereotyping, categorizing and generalizing other people and especially other faiths and religious practices is an evil force in our times that must be confronted and called out. "Othering" other religions and races is what led to the horrific violence in New Zealand on Friday.

Promoting this culture of dividing lines, building walls, and lumping people *has* to stop if we are to survive as the human race. By "lumping" I mean this: how many people do you know who think "all Muslims are

terrorists?". Or, "*all* those gun safety advocates want to take everybody's guns away!" Our challenge is this: How often do we *say* something when racist jokes are made, or stereotypes are propagated? Even when seemingly harmless or mild commentary? Or someone is "just joking?"

I will not stay silent on this because, I believe, in the core of my being, that, "as soon as we draw a line to exclude people, Jesus goes to the other side of that line with them and invites us to join him there. Every time." (Carlos Rodriguez)

As Christians we **MUST** stand up to **ANY**thing that is not Christ-like. That's what being a Christian *is* – not "my way or the highway" –only Christianity is The Way –the only valid religion. As if somehow, one faith in God could have the corner on the market and be the only valid faith in the God who is in all and among all and created us all?

We have wise counsel from our faith leaders on this: "To all my Christian friends - please practice and express an articulation of your Christianity that is not threatened by the beauty of faith in whatever form it takes. Please don't buy the false claim that your faith is the only and the true faith - it comes with dire consequences and it isn't true." (John Dorhauer)

I am willing to accept that Jesus is the only way for Christians.

I am unwilling to accept that Christians get to decide it is the only way for everyone else. (Barbara Brown Taylor)

Our God is One God. We are all children of the One God. Practice a faith that makes room for all—no competition or exclusion!

Right here, in our town, in our community, in our homes, is where the root of this gets planted. And right here in our homes, our community, our country, *our* lives and hearts is where it needs to be challenged. Rooted out, confronted. If you ever hear the words, “My way is the right way; those other people have it wrong,” practice the pause. Ponder those words. And then challenge them. You can do it lovingly!

For those situations, those times we want to not rock the boat, is the Devil tempting us, like Jesus, to be other than ourselves. Other than loving, accepting, Christ-emulating disciples. Tempting us to worship the things and powers of this world: hatred, oppression, discrimination, supremacy, racism, status quo and exclusion. That is the temptation that is before us—right here and now. To accept any of this wrong as “normal.” To stay silent in the face of white-washed evil.

IV. LOOKING AT OURSELVES AND CHRIST

Who are you? What does your “purpose-filled life” look like? What are you called to do and be in this one, wild and precious life you are given? Do you ever wonder?

When we are tempted to be other than ourselves, we must also be mindful of how we expect others to be other than *themselves*. We need to look in the mirror as well as look out at the world through Christ’s eyes.

See the Christ in one another—that spark of the Divine. No matter how different they might be from us—not matter how foreign their lives, culture, religious expressions are from our own.

And we must start now. The world needs it desperately. The world needs us to be our genuine, authentic selves in every moment, in every temptation to be fake or *disingenuous*.

And, the God of us all, throughout the world, needs us—whether in the wilderness or on the mountaintop—to extend the grace we’ve been given to every soul we meet or have yet to meet. Grace to be *their* authentic selves before God. And when the Evil One tries to tempt and reign chaos among us, we need to be Ministering Angels to one another—such as were sent to Jesus there in the desert—no matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey. Amen.

Hold your Muslim friends especially close today. We stand together, for peace.

All people should be safe in their community. Safe to pray, to pick up their kids from school, safe from fascist hatred.

We must root out this poison & demand action from our leaders.

We must stand in love - speak up about 'little' comments & racism; call out this hate in all its forms. It starts small and festers. Don't let it get a foothold.

Fight in love. For love.