

March 17, 2019

Second Sunday of Lent

Luke 4: 1-13

Prayer: Dear Lord, Be with us during our journey through Lent. Perhaps we in this place understand its darkness better than most. We pray in the name you wore as you trudged toward the cross. Amen.

Temptation

I once accompanied someone to an attorney's office about a DUI charge. The attorney was astounded that the person had refused a breathalyzer when he was stopped by police.

I said, "But I thought that's what you guys recommend."

And he said, "It is! But I've never had anybody actually do it!"

Last month, I ran into the pastor of a church in Mauldin. He said, "I've been meaning to call you. I think I'm going to hire a social worker."

Like the attorney, I said, "I recommend that everywhere I go. But I've never had anybody actually do it!"

Many of us are accustomed to being ignored. I'm too scared to go back to the scores of churches who have visited here to see if they adopted any of our recommendations. I'm afraid I'd be crushed.

Because we have to be content with doing the work. Planting the seeds. The harvest cannot be our concern.

And so it was with the greatest surprise -- and joy -- that I have watched the work of three of our parishioners in response to a sermon I preached.

A couple of years back, I preached about the creation of the Greenville Homeless Alliance. All the homeless service providers – Miracle Hill, Salvation Army, Greenville Mental Health, United Ministries, United Housing Connections, Triune – had come together to create this collective to address Greenville's affordable housing crisis.

I called us “the usual suspects.” And I said if the usual suspects could’ve solved this problem, we’d already have done it. It was going to take far more -- government and developers and businesses and philanthropists and caring citizens – to house our homeless citizens.

Well, a retired transplant from Boston, Jim Carroll, was listening that Sunday. Really listening.

And he went out to his classes in Furman's OLLI program for retirees and started talking about Greenville's housing needs. And those wonderful people who have a huge breadth of skills and expertise and time and energy banded together to research and do something.

That "something" is Church Street Place at Poe Mill, the 35-unit housing project I talked about earlier. They came alongside our friends at United Housing Connections to get this project underway. And let me tell you, they are moving fast.

The groundbreaking is April 11. A big fundraising party at the Westin Poinsett is May 2.

Meanwhile, another of our parishioners, Bucky Tarleton, is a developer. And he took a job as real estate development consultant for United Housing Connections. That means he will manage the Church Street project.

This morning, I'd like to introduce you to Jim and Peg Carroll and to Bucky Tarleton.

I want you to know their faces in case you want to talk to them about this project. In case you want to join in.

I believe that everyone who sets foot into Triune's worship service cares about affordable housing. You wouldn't be here if you didn't have a heart for people who are experiencing homelessness, who are living outside.

So over the next year, if you'd like to join Jim and Peg and Bucky in this effort, they'd love to have your help.

Today is the second Sunday of Lent. Quite simply, the season of Lent is made up of the 40 days, excluding Sundays, leading to Easter.

It's the season of anticipation of Christ's torture, crucifixion and resurrection. Traditionally, it's a solemn time when we take stock of our lives, look at where we've fallen short, give up something that tempts us as a way of standing in solidarity with Jesus's temptations in the desert.

But this morning, I'd like us to think bigger than giving up the temptation of chocolate or wine, lattes or television. I'd like for us to give up the temptation of thinking ourselves too small to affect great change. The temptation to think we're too old, too inexperienced, too unconnected, too ... small.

Because our retired friends at OLLI are showing us that age is no barrier. Former or current career is no barrier. Who you know or don't know is no barrier.

This Lent, instead of resisting something negative, let's look at living into something positive. How might we live into bigger lives? Lives that impact others. Lives that create a place of safety and stability, a place of beauty and calm for people who have little of it.

We're going to turn today to the Scripture that defines Lent – the temptation of Jesus.

Luke 4: 1-13:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

³The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '

9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you",

¹¹and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

¹²Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Bible is in conversation with itself. Nowhere is that clearer than in this text.

This text is loud with the echoes of the Old Testament. It brims with Old Testament quotations -- from both Jesus and the devil. It is a textbook case of

someone who knows Scripture in his head and has not the slightest understanding of it in his heart.

For like many people in our time, the devil knows Scripture. He invites Jesus to leap from the temple, and then quotes Psalm 91 to assure him he will be miraculously protected.

“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” (Ps. 91: 11-12)

And he was right. Jesus could have succumbed to the temptation to provide a miracle. If he had, we'd be reading that account today and glorifying that miracle. We'd be celebrating the come-uppance that Jesus gave the devil.

But that was not to be the nature of his ministry. No, his ministry was to be a model of self-deprivation and self-sacrifice. His ministry was a model of human behavior that we would never choose. That was why his disciples had such a hard time understanding it.

And it all began right here – with his “no” to the devil and his “no” to the kind of ministry, the kind of life, that would glorify himself.

First, the devil invited him to turn stone into bread. A real temptation involves that which is good. Just imagine, turning stones into bread. What a good thing for the hungry! What a good thing for Jesus to be able to eat and regain his strength and feed the multitudes.

Second, the devil invited him to rule the kingdoms of the world. Just imagine, Jesus as ruler of the world. What a good thing for oppressed people! What a good thing to be governed with fairness and compassion.

Third, the devil invited him to leap from the pinnacle of the temple. What a good thing for the Pharisees and Sadducees to witness! What hope to those longing for proof of God's presence in the world, to those longing for a Messiah.

You see, that's the thing about temptation. It is couched in whatever truly tempts a person. Other than the invitation to worship him, the devil doesn't really tempt Jesus with evil things. He tempts him with good things.

And that is the very nature of evil: Its ability to look good or innocent.

We are tempted by drugs *not* because we want to live in a dirty, abandoned building with no heat. We are tempted by drugs because for a little while, they make us feel powerful or loved.

We are tempted to under-fund our bus system *not* because we hate the poor.

We are tempted to under-fund it because we have so many other priorities. Or because we have not allowed ourselves to see what a critical lifeline it is for so many.

We are tempted to build more prisons *not necessarily* because we are anti-immigrant and racist but because it's easier than dealing with underlying problems of foreign policy and poverty – issues in which our lifestyles might even have a part.

The evil of temptation is that it can look so darned respectable. The tempter in the Garden of Eden did not say, *Do you wish to be like the devil?*

He asked, *Do you wish to be like God?* (Gen. 3: 5)

That's pretty much the same question that the same tempter posed all those centuries later as Jesus wandered, parched and hungry, in the wilderness. *Do you wish to be like God? You can do it by creating food, by ruling the world, by leaping into immortality.*

But unlike Adam and Eve, who answered yes, they did want to eat from the tree in the Garden of Eden, they did want to be like God, Jesus answered “no.”

Simply “no.”

Instead, he would suffer hunger and thirst and loneliness as a human being.

The book of Hebrews comments upon this decision and its meaning for us:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we, yet without sin.” (Heb. 4: 15)

This is why we observe the season of Lent for 40 days. For 40 days, we commemorate Jesus's decision to live as a human being and to refuse to take advantage of those avenues open to him to be more like God.

For 40 days, we look into ourselves and seek to discover what it means to follow this man who was God -- and this God who lived as man.

For, of course, in the end, it was not just 40 days. Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness was only the beginning.

“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

We know that opportune time. It was three years later, as the Passover approached. Luke tells us that **“Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve.”** (Luke 22: 3)

We will talk about those events as Lent and Holy Week unfold over these 40 days.

But here in the early days of Lent, it is enough to reflect on Jesus's early battle with evil. Because it is a battle that we not only commemorate, but that we continue to fight.

There is evil in this neighborhood. There are drug dealers and beatings and physical abuse and rape and theft and gambling addictions. Those things occur here with alarming and casual frequency.

But there is also evil outside this neighborhood, perhaps a more beguiling evil. When we are tempted by ever larger houses, ever more expensive cars, ever more, more, more – while our bus system goes unfunded, while our affordable housing goes unbuilt -- that is probably closer to Jesus's temptations.

Many authors writing about poverty make a convincing argument that we who over-consume play a large part in our society's inequity, in our society's poverty. Certainly in our society's pollution.

Like stones into bread, the worst evil may not be the most obvious. It may be the most attractive.

And so, what if during this Lent, we turned our silly “no” of things we love – chocolate and wine, lattes and television – into a “yes” for housing for someone who’s never going to get it otherwise.

Church Street Place at Poe Mill is what we call permanent supportive housing. What that rather high-faluting phrase means is that its residents will need mental health counselors to visit regularly. They will need someone to manage their money. They will need a locked and safe place to return at night, away from the drug dealers and violent predators and pimps who prowl these neighborhoods.

For some of the people you meet at Triune, that’s the only way they will ever obtain housing.

Our temptation may be to go home to Chanticleer or Sugar Creek or Pebble Creek and forget about them. But you have chosen to worship here among those most in danger. And that tells me you are willing to step up during this Lenten season and do something about the way they live.

I’m going to ask some of our partner churches if they’d like to make these envelopes available to their congregations, too.

But no other church is touched by this issue like we are. No other church sees homeless people at every single worship service, every single lunchtime like we do.

So during this Lent, how fine not to simply resist our personal temptations.

But to resist the temptation to live small.

To embrace our gifts of energy and resources, time and talent.

To act in a way that Jesus taught the minute he left that desert: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Amen.