



We began the season of Epiphany with the baptism of Jesus and this morning, the First Sunday in Lent, we get a flashback to what happened next. Jesus spent a long period of time in the desert, fasting and preparing for his ministry. And while he was there he was confronted by the sin matrix personified in the devil aka Satan. Some people get very bothered by the idea of Satan – they can't wrap themselves around the medieval Satan with pitchfork and evil angels ready to toss evildoers into hell. I honestly don't think it matters whether we imagine the power of darkness in a personal way or whether we see it as an impersonal power that can act in and through people and situations. However we look at it, Satan is real and active

in our world today.

The three temptations of Christ represent classic ways that the sin matrix tries, and often succeeds in pulling us away from the path of love.

The first one is hunger. Most of us have appetites that far exceed our needs, not just for food but for prestige, pleasure, success, money and material things. The western world has an appetite for raw materials, energy, and material comfort that far exceeds the planet's ability to satisfy. We are constantly tempted to take more than we need. In fact, it's so much part of our lives that often we don't even know what is enough. We continue to live in big houses that made sense when we had children, but we no longer need them. We continue to pile food on our plates even though we end up leaving some of it, or we buy more at the market than we will actually eat.

In this country 30-40% of food is wasted, or about 20 pounds per person per month,<sup>1</sup> yet 1 in 7 Americans wonder where their next meal is coming from.<sup>2</sup>

As followers of Christ, we know that our life is in Christ, not in food or any other material thing and so we can find out what is truly enough and live with enough so that we can share our abundance with others. This is one of the tremendous advantages of fasting. When we fast, we discover our appetites in a new way. We discover the desire within us and can learn what is truly important. When you are thirsty a glass of water is absolutely delicious; the next glass may not be quite so wonderful, the next will be less satisfying and if you keep drinking there's going to be a point where you're just forcing it down.

Your body knows when it has had enough water. But most of us don't manage to stop eating when we have had enough. I don't manage to stop buying books even though I actually haven't read the least ten I got. I don't know what your equivalent is. All of us have areas where our appetite is greater than our need; where our desire for more is not healthy for ourselves or for the rest of creation.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.worldfooddayusa.org/food\\_waste\\_the\\_facts](http://www.worldfooddayusa.org/food_waste_the_facts)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/hunger-and-poverty/?\\_ga=1.211381852.814011944.1455458520](http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/hunger-and-poverty/?_ga=1.211381852.814011944.1455458520)

Being stewards of God's creation means finding out what really gives us joy, what really serves us so that we can serve God and letting go of the other things. Retraining our appetites so that we can live with an ethic of gentle restraint.

The second temptation is one of power. We all want to feel powerful – we all want our own way because our way is best. Jesus was tempted to become the Sovereign of Creation the quick and easy way – by selling out to the sin matrix – rather than the hard and tortuous route he actually took, which was to oppose the sin matrix and in so doing to make it powerless.

There is nothing wrong with power when we use it for love and the furtherance of the reign of God. There is a lot wrong with power when we use it to try to enforce our will on others and to take away their power. That is easy to see when it is writ large upon the world stage; when we see dictators oppressing their people or people waging war in order to impose their own way of life on others or fighting over scarce resources of water or oil. It's harder to see in ourselves.

Jesus did not take up Satan's offer of easy power and authority. But neither did he surrender his power. It wasn't power that was the problem but the way it was gained and used. The power of the people of God comes from within. It is a gift of God given to us so that we may work for the coming reign of God. Like money, power is a resource which is given to us to use to help those who are powerless to find their voices, to raise up the oppressed and to resist evil in whatever form we find it. The sin matrix is the human system which continues to keep some people powerless in order that others may have power and money.

Last week I shared with you this quote from Dr King:

“On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”<sup>3</sup>

The sin matrix is the system which makes sure that some men and women *will* “be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.” The sin matrix is what creates the edifice that King says needs restructuring. As the children of God we are called to use our power to actively resist all oppression in a gentle non-violent and yet powerful way.

The third temptation was the ultimate publicity stunt. Jump off the top of the temple and land unharmed. What a way to get attention! What a way to let the whole world know that Jesus is the Son of God! What a quick way to make the point. Surely that would be a lot better than slogging

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<sup>3</sup> "A Time to Break Silence," at Riverside Church

through little villages and small towns, preaching the good news to people unwilling to listen, healing many and having to deal with everyone's need and demands.

We are constantly tempted to take short cuts. The ends justifies the means. Sometimes that works well. If I'm playing golf and I aim to do a pretty little chip which will lightly lift the ball out of the rough and land it on the green right next to the hole, and I actually mess it up so the ball never gets airborne but somehow rolls onto the green and ends up reasonably close to where I wanted it; if that happens I happily say "Well it wasn't pretty but it worked."

But that's golf, not real life. In real life, for the people of God, the ends very rarely justify the means. The *way* we do something is as much a demonstration of our baptismal vows as what it achieves. Do we take action with respect for everyone involved? Do we take into account and try to incorporate the ideas of those who disagree? Do we create space for everyone to voice their opinion? Do we seek and serve the Christ in all persons as we take action?

Again, we can see this principle in action – or rather not in action – in national politics. A political climate has been created which says that if we disagree on one issue we disagree on everything and can have no meaningful dialog. The way of Christ is to treat everyone with honor and respect even though we may call out their policies. Jesus was scarcely kind to the Pharisees in his teaching, but always dealt with individual Pharisees with great respect.

As the followers of Christ, we know that everyone is beloved in the eyes of God and it is our calling to treat them as if they were Christ himself.

Our psalm this morning contains many promises for the one who is bound to God in love. We are bound to God in love because we call upon her with sincere and open hearts and minds. We are God's beloved and we are bound to him in love. That is our core identity. That is more important than race, class, gender, political party or any other way that we self-identify. As we were reminded in the second reading, "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him."

It was pointed out last night in our gospel discussion during the Saturday evening service, that in every temptation, Satan is taunting Jesus "If you are the Son of God..." Are you really the Son of God? Is that really who you are? He is challenging Jesus to prove himself.

But Jesus is confident in his own identity. Jesus knows who he is. He is not going to use quick and easy methods which would ultimately completely undermine his ministry. We are the beloved of God. We are the ones who are called to live a life free from the sin matrix and resisting all its subtle claims on us. We are the ones who are called to bring God's reign on earth. We are a challenge to the sin matrix and we too will be tested. When that happens, remember who you are. You are the beloved of God.

Remember who you are.

