

“God is obnoxiously relational”

Many of you heard my passing remark on Ash Wednesday that I thought we had the wrong Gospel reading. If you remember, Jesus was admonishing us to not be overly showy in our piety, as if our looking super religious would spark recognition in others. We then gathered at the font to receive ashes with the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And then we walked around with little black-ish smudges on our foreheads for all the world to see.

A long time ago, the start of Lent was moved: it originally started on what would be today, but was moved back to the Wednesday prior, giving us Ash Wednesday this last week. While the day was moved, the lections were not, for reasons that I do not fully understand - perhaps it wasn't thoroughly thought through. The Gospel reading today - the temptation of Jesus - was the Gospel sitting at the beginning of the liturgical Lenten journey. Which is to say, the Gospel reading we just heard makes a lot more sense in terms of beginning the Lenten journey than what we heard Ash Wednesday. But I don't have enough advanced degrees to find a slot on the prayerbook revision committee, so I merely hope that we can fix the discrepancy with the next prayer book.

So, if you missed Ash Wednesday - one of the most beautiful services of the year - today's gospel is the lesson you really want to start Lent with anyway.

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Lent is a time of preparation, reflection, and self examination, where we evaluate our relationship with ourselves and with God. And the Gospel story to kick off this annual pilgrimage is this: Jesus is tempted. I imagine everyone here has heard the story 100 times. Jesus is fasting in the wilderness for 40 days (which is bible-speak for “a really long time,” probably not exactly 40 days), and at the end of his fast, he is visited by the devil.

The devil “tempts” Jesus by asking him to prove his divinity and turn stones into bread. The devil “tempts” Jesus to jump off of a high bell tower to prove his divinity.

The devil “tempts” Jesus with the whole world - all Jesus has to do is worship him. Jesus declines, the devil leaves, and angels come to attend to him.

But have you ever wondered what is missing from this story? We witness the pinnacle of temptation - have you ever noticed how much seems to be missing. Almost *everything* we associate with being a “good” person isn’t there. Which might be telling us that what we often think of as the most important things to God, really aren’t. Like somehow we ended up with the wrong list of do-s and dont-s!

I realize that I’m making a pretty incredible claim, so I’ll spin it out a little but. Look back at the story: the devil does not entice Jesus with the traits, skills, or worldly goods of another person. So Jealousy (or lack thereof), as destructive as it can be, isn’t in and of itself the point of Lent. Neither does the devil “tempt” Jesus with chocolate, cake, or an underwear model. Maybe calories and a healthy libido aren’t products of hell’s workshop afterall. The devil does not tempt Jesus with anger, so avoiding anger can’t be the point of Lent. The devil does not tempt Jesus to just coast, and take it easy, so running ourselves ragged can’t be the main thrust of Lent either. The devil doesn’t tempt Jesus with being rude - so maybe being super nice to people isn’t the point of Lent either. Notice the devil doesn’t tempt Jesus to swear with four letter words - so maybe not swearing isn’t such a spiritually fulfilling undertaking after all. Also, the devil doesn’t tempt Jesus to skip work or school or church any other social obligation that would influence what we might think of as being a good member of society.

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Unfortunately, what this means is that most of us, when it comes to being holy and walking the pilgrimage of Lent, most of us need to take most of what we think about God and being holy and throw it in a dumpster, light the dumpster on fire, push the dumpster off of a cliff into a great void, and start over.

The journey of walking with God is not about being obnoxiously good at following rules, not about being careful to not offend sensitive people, not about eating and drinking and sex, not about working hard, not about keeping your language “G” rated. Not about being “nice.” Tragically, most of what I just listed are usually distractions that keep our attention from who God is really calling us to be.

If you are worried about “being a good person,” worried about what everyone else thinks, worried about holy and unholy foods (or in current cultural jargon, healthy or unhealthy foods), worried about the longings of your own body and strangling your own passion, worried about working enough, worried about stuffing your anger long enough not to utter a “swear” word, worried about being “holy” enough, on top of paying rent, car repairs, insurance, medical bills, tuition, your pledge to the church - you probably don’t have anything left to worry about what Matthew today tells us is of paramount importance - relationship.

And if there was still a devil today, hypothetically, what an effective scheme that would be, wouldn’t it? Make everyone so distracted by focusing on little things that don’t actually matter that they completely miss the cluster of fractured and fragmented relationships they are constantly tripping over. Hypothetically.

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So what then *is* being Holy? Can saints say bad words? I think so. Can you slow your pace, take a deep breath, and give thanks to God for all that is good? Yup. Can you eat chocolate and ice cream and drink coffee and smoke cigarettes and still go to heaven? You better. Can you be holy and have burned every bridge, pushed away all who have loved you, and destroyed every meaningful relationship you have had with anyone or anything? No. Now we are talking about something that is *actually* bad.

Being holy is fundamentally about being in touch with and connected to God. God who is in touch with and connected to - everything, and everyone. As you well know, if you look at your own life, being in touch with and connected to God is something we screw up all the time, but not for the reasons we usually site. Since being Holy is about being connected to God, who is inherently and obnoxiously relational; holiness does not lend itself to checklists and best practices. Now we love checklists, and plans, and SOPs, so if we don’t have any we make them up, right? And boy haven’t we ever made many such comprehensive plans up as a church, and dear God are we ever paying for it today?

In the Gospel reading, the devil is tempting Jesus to “cash in” his relationship with God, to turn stones to bread, to do something outlandish and jump off of a bell tower, to trade it for literally everything. And Jesus says no - with a resolve and a fidelity and a

faithfulness that is beyond any of us here in this room. Jesus understands the relationship, and just how valuable it is.

Relationships, that thing that defies checklists, plans, and order, is what we are called to reexamine in Lent. Because God is found in the relationship you have with yourself, in the relationship you have with God directly, in the relationship you have with loved ones, in the relationship you have with not-loved ones. That is why things like racial reconciliation are important - the reality is that if we cannot be in healthy relationship with others, we cannot be in full healthy relationship with God.

Now, the upshot of this realization is that it makes it easy to check in on our spiritual life as we begin Lent. Since "How is your relationship with God?" Is probably too hard or abstract - or too much to bite off at once, I can get at it indirectly:

How is your relationship with God? Well, how is your relationship with your kids? How is your relationship with your parents? *Especiall*y if they are no longer with us because they have died. How is your relationship with your husband, or wife, or partner? How is your relationship with poor people? How is your relationship with rich people? The people who live next to you? The people you know? The people you don't know? The people you have forgotten about?

Do you really want to know how your relationship with God is? That is where to look.

Amen.