



WHERE WESTMINSTER  
GATHERS FOR WORSHIP

## A Homily on Matthew 4:1-11<sup>1</sup>

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### First Sunday in Lent

February 10, 2008

It's pretty clear in our scripture readings today that here at the beginning of our forty-day season of preparation for Easter, the subject is temptation.

I don't know if you've noticed, but often in a conversation or discussion when the subject of temptation comes up, people will grin or maybe even chuckle. Inevitably, someone will quote Oscar Wilde, "I can resist anything but temptation."<sup>2</sup>

Then the stories start. Remember that day last week when it was cold and rainy, I woke up and heard the rain on the roof and was I ever tempted to just turn over and go back to sleep. Or I was sitting in the balcony last Sunday, and K.C. was in the back of the Sanctuary getting ready for the procession, and boy was I temped to drop a paper wad right on his bald spot. Or you're with friends in a restaurant, and the waiter comes around with the dessert menu. "What'll it be? Key lime pie? A fudge square with ice cream and caramel sauce?" "Get behind me, Satan."

We tend to trivialize temptation. But it is abundantly clear that there is nothing trivial about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness because fresh from the waters of his baptism, he is struggling with the question of just who he is, how he will relate to God, and how he will live his life. The temptations are not a set-up to test whether Jesus will cross some moral line and "sin." They reveal whether he will be the person God is calling him to be.<sup>3</sup> They reveal who he is and what his mission in the world is.

He is the Son of God, who is a model of covenant fidelity.<sup>4</sup> He serves God with complete trust and unswerving obedience. He chooses not to turn stones into bread to meet his own needs, but to live in total dependence on God's grace. He refuses to test God by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, but to live trusting without testing God's faithfulness. He refuses to try to be like God as Adam and Eve did. Rather, he chooses to live in obedience to God, dependent on God's grace, and willing to let God be God. He will live in covenant fidelity with God.

But, revealing and powerful as it is, this story is not only about who Jesus is as the Child of God. It is also about who we are called to be as children of God, we who claim to be disciples of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> We encounter Jesus in the Gospels in a story like this, and we become conscious of ourselves in a new way - conscious of our temptation to be other than the persons God calls us to be.<sup>6</sup> The temptation that Israel faced, Jesus faced, and we face, is not the temptation to commit some sin, but to be other than the persons God calls us to be.<sup>7</sup>

We are called to trust God's grace and to obey God's will. Matthew focuses his entire Gospel on this calling of ours to be faithful covenant partners. Over and over Matthew reminds us that we are called to obey God by loving neighbor and serving others in God's name. "Be perfect," Matthew allows us to hear Jesus saying, "Be perfect," which is to say, "obey." Matthew allows us to hear Jesus saying, "Even as you have done it to the least of these, you've done it to me." This is our calling - to obey Jesus' command to love the least of our brothers and sisters as we have been loved.

<sup>1</sup> This is a revision of a sermon preached on February 13, 2005, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN.

<sup>2</sup> The introduction to this sermon is a variation on Fred Craddock's sermon introduction, on tape, "Sermons Preached at Cherry Log, The Lenten Series 1999," sermon #1. The Wilde quote is from *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act I.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel According to Matthew*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 372.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

<sup>7</sup> Long, p. 37.

This story, powerful as it is in setting forth who Jesus is called to be, and powerful as it is in setting forth who we are called to be as individual disciples - this story is incredibly powerful in another way. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann somewhere reminds us that Matthew is a "Church book," a Gospel that cares about what the Church is and how to be the Church. So the story of the Temptations while a story about Jesus' individual struggle with his identity and by extension our identity struggle as well, is also a story about the Church's clarification of its identity; a story about our struggle with "all of those voices of threat and seduction that seek to talk us out of being the Church."<sup>8</sup>

On the first Sunday in Lent it might be in order to ask ourselves about our identity, about who we think we ought to be, and what we ought to do as the Church. What does it mean to be the Church?

I know myself well enough to know that I am preoccupied at times with numbers. Are you? How many members have we gained or lost? What's the budget this year as compared to last? How many are in Sunday School? How many regularly attend worship?

I ask myself - I confess it! - I ask myself, "How many programs have we got going? Are we appealing to the needs of those we wish to attract to our church and those we are trying to hold on to?" I ask myself, "How can we keep our members happy and satisfied and supportive of their church?" But shouldn't I, shouldn't we all, also be asking, "Why are we not doing more to reach out to the hurting of our world? To the least of our brothers and sisters?" Shouldn't we do more to challenge one another to give our money, our time, ourselves to feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, and welcome the stranger, instead of worrying about numbers, institutional maintenance and survival?

I came across an interesting article the other day about a very large church in the Midwest that by almost every measure appears to be successful. It started in a movie theatre with an organizing pastor knocking on doors and asking people if they went to church. When the answer was "No," he then asked, "What would it take for you to go to church?" And he built his church around the goal of meeting those expectations. On the wall of that pastor's study there's a poster that reads, "What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?"<sup>9</sup> The goal of that church has been to be a big box church with programs for people at every level of spiritual maturity to consume and engage. The church has thousands of members now and has spawned dozens of clones all over the country.

Recently the leadership of the congregation hired an outside organization to study the church in order to determine whether the programs and activities are actually helping people mature spiritually. "We believe," one leader said, "that the more people participate in [our] activities with higher levels of frequency, the more it will produce disciples of Christ. This is how we do it," he continued, "We measure levels of participation."

The research, the study of the church, took several years, and the leadership was shocked at the result. Two sentences of the research read this way: "Increasing levels of participation in these sets of activities does NOT predict whether someone's becoming more of a disciple of Christ. It does NOT predict whether they love God more or they love people more." The organizing pastor says,

Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into, thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back, [the revelation was that] it wasn't helping people that much...We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take the responsibility to become 'self-feeders.' We should have gotten people,

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Anna Carter Florence, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> [www.willowcreekrepents.com](http://www.willowcreekrepents.com)

taught people, how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.

It's easy to misconstrue our identity, our calling as the Church of Jesus Christ. It's tempting to limit our mission to growing numbers through appealing, but not necessarily challenging, programs that fail to actually form faithful disciples.

Who are we, the Church, called to be? What the culture expects? What our constituents think we ought to be? What potential members wish we would be? Or are we called to be faithful covenant partners in the work that God is about in this world, seeking to obey God, and trusting that ultimately the point is not members or programs or success or popularity, but faithfulness and ministry to the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters?

It is just four days since we gathered here on Ash Wednesday to receive the sign of the cross on our forehead. It is a mark that answers the question, "Who am I? Who are we as the Church?"

In his dense, but wonderful, novel, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez has a scene in which several rather seedy characters go to church on Ash Wednesday for the traditional imposition of ashes. Afterwards they discover that they are unable to wash from their foreheads the black sign of the cross. It's a provocative image. What does Marquez mean by it? That we are forever stained with sin, so stained that we can never be cleansed, can never recover our true God-given identity? Or does he mean that we are marked as ones who, through the cross of Jesus Christ, belong to God, and therefore our identity is indelible?

We have embarked upon the Lenten journey. It demands that we face anew the question, "Who am I, and who are we as the Church?" even as Jesus faced that question in the wilderness long ago. But like him, we do not have to make up the answer to the question. Remember, in the wilderness Jesus met each temptation with a quote from the book of Deuteronomy. He had his Bible with him. As Walter Brueggemann says, "He had the whole deep resource of faith memories that are old and trusted and reliable. He was not out there alone, but in the company of many ancient, faithful, trusted voices that told him who he was."<sup>10</sup>

We are baptized. We belong to Jesus Christ. We are members of his Church, and so are surrounded by thousands who have gone before us and a host of others in this place today who also make the Lenten journey, seeking to be obedient and faithful disciples. We have the Scriptures, and we have the whole of the Christian tradition, and we have one another. We have all the resources we need to remind us of who we are, to remind us that our identity is indelible.

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<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, p. 38.