

THE FIRST TEMPTATION

Sermon, February 21, 2021

The First Sunday in Lent

Texts: Mark 1:9-13; Matthew 4:1-11

"Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, for they shall be filled," Jesus tells us in His Beatitudes ... blessed are those who earnestly desire and have an appetite for what is good and right. They will be filled, satisfied, *satiated*. Appetites are not bad; we were designed by our Creator to hunger and thirst. It is a sign of physical health to be hungry and thirsty. Appetite is good, but how we fill the appetite isn't always good, and can work against our well-being. The Christian faith affirms desire is good; it is part of who we are made in the image of God. The problem is not that we have appetites and desires; the problem is that we too often give in to the temptation to fill those proper desires improperly. The wrong way. Some believe that truly spiritual people are never really bothered by temptation, that they are never inclined to fill their desires inappropriately. Some of you may remember the theological term for that belief; in the original Latin, it is pronounced: *"Bah - LOE - nee."* Jesus was the embodiment of true spirituality, and He was strongly tempted by the devil! Temptation has a very real appeal to our deepest God-given hungers ... and I submit that what the Tempter offered Jesus was appealing to Him.

Mark gives no details of the nature of Jesus' temptations; but Matthew does. I would argue the temptations mentioned are all appealing to Jesus' desires. After all, Jesus is the Savior, and His deepest desire is to save the world and do the things a Savior does: to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to have as many as possible follow Him in the ways of life abundant and full. That's the desire to which the devil is appealing. He is offering Jesus short cuts to help Him achieve His own good goals, but to use devilish means to attain them. *"Prove you are the son of God and turn these stones into bread. Use your power to create something out of nothing and feed yourself and feed all the needy people (that's what Congress calls a Covid relief package)".* He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and says, *"Throw yourself down, and let the angels catch you. Do something really spectacular and stupendous to impress the people; then you'll really gather a crowd."* The tempter took Him to a high place, and they looked out over all the kingdoms of the world, and the devil said, *"All of these are mine, but I'll give it all to you if you will simply worship me."* Jesus would have loved to have the kingdoms of the world; He wants to save them; but He needs to do it the way God has ordained and never should the proper worship of God be neglected in pursuit of these goals. In short, these are not temptations about ends, these are temptations about means. Short cuts to achieve good goals, but using devilish means to attain them. These kind of short cuts just get you lost, and this "devil's food" is always carcinogenic

The first of the temptations of Jesus is perhaps the most primal, which is the temptation to do whatever it takes to satisfy your appetite. *"Scratch your itch, fill your belly, satisfy your urge. That's what's important in life, that's how you find fulfillment."* No, there is something far more important in life than just satisfying appetites. Jesus responded, *"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" As mentioned in the Time With the Children, I always like to note something about these temptations in the wilderness that is easily missed, something which is actually is the real First (as in primary) Temptation. The context for this wilderness trial is that Jesus had just been baptized by John. God's audible voice had spoken clearly from the heavens at that baptism saying, "THIS IS MY SON." With this voice still ringing in Jesus' ears, along comes the devil saying, "IF you are the Son of God ..." I like to imagine Jesus responding, "What do you mean, 'IF?' God just SAID I'm His Son. I don't need to turn stones into bread or any other magical tricks to prove it. God said it, I believe it, that settles it."* The mistake Adam and Eve made was allowing the Tempter to foster doubt about what God had CLEARLY SAID, and then appealing to a desire that yearned to be filled. Theirs was not the Original Sin so much because it is the first one committed. It was "original" in the sense of "origin;" this is at the root of all our sin: Questioning what God has clearly said. We are trying to *be* God rather than *trusting* God ... that's the origin of all sin.

No, Jesus says, there is something more important in life than just satisfying desires and urges, and that is learning, hearing, trusting, heeding, obeying, every word of God ... and THEN satisfying our desires accordingly!

Speaking of bread and its relation to living by every word of God: Last November I made the observation that when we pray that petition in the Lord's Prayer, *"Give us this day our daily bread,"* we aren't just praying for general nourishment alone. We are praying for all kinds of related concerns! We are praying for all involved in bringing bread, sustenance, to our individual tables and the tables of others. When we pray *"Give us this day our daily bread,"* we are not asking God to turn stones into bread. By inference we are praying for our community, our state, our place of employment, our nation, our representatives, our President ...and in this global economy we are praying for world heads of state, business leaders, for the moral and spiritual health of countless millions who make up a society ... all of which enables "daily bread" to get to the table. In short, people won't get bread on their plate unless there are good roads, unless there are good farmers and harvesters and bakers and packagers and truck drivers and stores AND unless they have means of income and job security, all under the protection of good laws

and the administration of a benevolent government that is stable, moral and TRUSTWORTHY ... and ultimately, unless there are enough ethical, honest, honorable, trustworthy, and diligent citizens and government officials to preserve and maintain order once order is established. Honorable hardworking people of integrity help undergird the entire infrastructure that enables bread to get to our plates; it just doesn't magically appear. If that support chain of food production and distribution is disrupted, bread won't get to our table. Daily bread becomes an absolute luxury and rarity **whenever** government breaks down.¹

We got just a wee taste of this at the outbreak of this pandemic; never before in my entire life had I been unable to purchase toilet paper! And eventually we started seeing the disappearance of much more important items from the store shelves ... e.g., fresh beef, eggs, poultry ... all because of the disruption of supply chains, people's propensity to panic, and frankly, not well-thought-through edicts/decisions regarding what constituted "essential business." Cattle were being slaughtered and buried (or burned), eggs by the thousands were discarded, dairy products were poured down massive drains, all because complex distribution systems were disrupted and products could not get to the stores (and when some products did, people overbought and hoarded) ... "our daily bread" was becoming endangered, and this is not to mention the untold thousands who lost household income and livelihoods due to unprecedented shutdown of "non-essential" businesses. Anyway, without re-preaching that entire sermon from November 22, let me just say that simply put, if we are to continue enjoying "our daily bread," if we are to survive as a democratic republic, it is essential our society has men and women of faith, integrity, honor, virtue ... in short, men and women who determine to abide by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

In the 1700s a French judge and political philosopher by the name of Montesquieu was hugely influential to our founding fathers in drafting our constitution, he was cited more by our founders than any source except for the Bible. He is credited as the principal source of the brilliant theory of separation of powers, Legislative, Judicial and Executive (not Twitter, Facebook and Google), so that attempts by one branch of government to infringe on political liberty might be restrained by the other branches. Montesquieu observed that, historically, there are basically three types of government. Throughout human history, a functioning society of human beings always existed under some form of *despotism* (or *tyranny*), some form of a *republic*, or some form of *monarchy*. People could not live long in anarchy ... sooner or later, and usually sooner, one of these three basic forms will emerge: Some form of despotism, some form of a republic (or democracy), or some form of monarchy. He also noted that, historically, each of these forms of government has a non-negotiable social principle upon which it depends. If that social principle perishes, that form of government is lost. For example, **Despotism** or **Tyranny** stands or falls on the principle of **Fear**. The tyrant (or the tyrannical party) can rule only as long as he (or they) is able to intimidate the subjects. People who show spunk or courage and resist the tyrant must be purged; they are shut up, shut down and usually eliminated through suppression, persecution, imprisonment or execution. However, if enough people lose their fear of the despot, the tyranny will be overthrown, and will be replaced by either some form of monarchy or some form of a republic.

Monarchy stands or falls upon the social principle of **Honor**. The status of various groups within the monarchy are maintained by a designed system of protocol, chivalry, "court-esy"... where honor is maintained toward and among the nobility. But if that honor system disintegrates and/or degenerates, if the governed lose their sense of respect and honor and deference toward the monarch and the nobility, the monarchy will fail and move either in the direction of tyranny or a republic (see the Bolshevik and American revolutions, respectively ... the first resulted in the tyranny of Communism, the second the republic in which we live. Also witness the French revolution, which eventually resulted in a republic, but not before the massacres that took place under the tyranny of the Reign of Terror in the transition).

Do you know the non-negotiable social principle upon which a republic stands or falls, according to Montesquieu? The non-negotiable social principle is **Civic Virtue**. For a democratic society to function there must be a deep and abiding sense of virtue, integrity, honor and goodness among the citizenry. For a democratic republic to function, individuals in that society must be virtuous, trustworthy, decent, responsible, honest, honorable. A republic is the only form of government where the governed hold power over the governors. If the government becomes corrupt, and the people are still people of virtue, that corruption can be remedied. But if the people lose all sense of civic and individual virtue and honor, they can expect nothing but corruption in the government, and eventually the republic will cave in and give way to monarchy or tyranny. In almost all cases, historically, tyranny replaces democracy, for obvious reasons ... people who lack the internal moral restraints of virtue need to be increasingly controlled and restrained by force and, inevitably, by those who are "above" the law. Leadership then degenerates into pure power, a tyranny ... and there's little chance that tyranny will exhibit virtue.

Again, "Blessed are those who are hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled," Jesus says. Blessed are those who earnestly desire and have an appetite for what is good and right. Jesus also reiterates: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." If we are to be filled and fulfilled, if we are to continue enjoying "our daily bread", and if we are to survive as a democratic republic, then our society needs **us** (and others) to be men and women of faith, integrity and virtue ... who determine to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

¹ See "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread" at <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/give-us-this-day-our-daily-bread-2020-2.pdf>