



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Lenten Sermon by Brent J Eelman

Sinning with Profundity

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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." '

⁵Then 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." '*

⁹Then 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.

President Calvin Coolidge was well known for his terseness. One Sunday he was asked about the worship service he attended.

"Fine," he replied.

"What was the sermon about?" the person continued to inquire.

"Sin."

The questioner was beginning to become exasperated trying to get a conversation going and responded, "Well, what did he have to say about sin?"

"He was agin' it."

Most of us are more conversant than Coolidge, but few of us have more to say about the subject of sin than he did. Sin is not good and we are against it.

But what is sin? An Internet survey asked the question, "What are the most popular sins for Christians?" The "big five" were lust, anger, laziness, envy, and gluttony. Those are five of the "seven deadly sins", but here is the problem. When Jesus was in the wilderness and was tempted by the Devil, it was not to commit any one of

these “popular” sins: not lust, not anger, not laziness, not envy, and not gluttony! He did not wave a Hershey bar in front of Jesus and say... “Here, try this.” The Devil had bigger things in mind: He wanted Jesus to sin with profundity!

When we think about sin these days, we usually think small. Temptation centers around food and lust. Too often, sinfulness is merely a catalog of naughty behavior. Sometimes the sins we confess are so small, yet big enough to obscure our real sin.

The Danish theologian and social critic, Soren Kierkegaard had a great deal to say about sin. He was unimpressed, however, with what the 19th century Danes thought to be sinful. He wrote:

“The thoughts of their hearts are too paltry to be sinful. For a worm it might be regarded as a sin to harbor such thoughts, but not for a being made in the image of God. Their lusts are dull and sluggish, their passions sleepy...This is the reason my soul always turns back to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare. I feel that those who speak there are at least human beings: they hate, they love, they murder their enemies, and curse their descendants throughout all generations, they sin.”

Let us not misunderstand... Kierkegaard was not advocating murder and hate. He was declaring that we fail to recognize the profundity of our own sinfulness and have trivialized sin to eating an extra donut or Snickers Bar. What do Jesus’ temptations reveal about sin? How do they challenge us during this Lenten season of penance?

I

Luke placed the temptation of Jesus immediately following his baptism. Jesus’ baptism was the moment when the heavens opened and God claimed Jesus as his own. “This is my son...” God also went on to say: “Listen to him.” This was the beginning of his ministry, his calling as the Messiah.

The three temptations of Jesus were an attempt to modify, limit, and define his ministry and calling as the Messiah. Luke’s devil was clever. His entire approach was to neutralize the Messiah. He did this by offering him attractive options that would not merely define Jesus, but also limit him.

“If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread.” Think about it, if Jesus could turn stones into bread, he could feed the world! Hunger would be no more. Certainly the Son of God could do this. He could be an economic messiah. (We are still looking for an economic messiah today!) But Jesus said, “No. Bread alone is not enough.”

It was not that Jesus didn’t care about the hungry. He did. He fed people. He implored his disciples to feed people, (“I was hungry and you fed me.”). But the salvation that Jesus offered was greater than a full stomach. Jesus offers us a full life.

The Devil showed him the kingdoms of the world. “These are mine to give.” He was offering to make Jesus the king of kings: his King of Kings! (It is ironic that political power and authority are the devil’s to give.) Jesus refused. Jesus was not naïve. He was politically astute. Jesus led a march on the capital, (that is what Palm Sunday is about!). He confronted Pilate the Roman authority of his day and spoke truth to power. His teachings about money, taxes and the like all had political implications. But he was a king of a different sort. He eschewed the violence, deceit, and subterfuge that is the contemporary currency of political power and

authority. “That is not who I am.” Or as he said when interrogated by Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

“Jump down from this pinnacle and you will have them eating out of your hand.” “There is nothing like theatrics to impress people. Put on a good show. Get their attention. They will follow you anywhere. Jump down from this pinnacle.” Jesus response was that truth is not about the package it is delivered in. Truth does not need a light show and special effects. The world does not need a bungee jumping Jesus! The world needs a humble Servant/Savior.

II

Each one of these temptations was an attempt to define the meaning of Jesus’ baptism and his call as a messiah. They also had a ring of legitimacy. The tempter was neither ugly, nor confrontational. The devil also knew his scripture, and each one of these temptations was attractive. But that is the nature of sin, profound sin. It is not the donut or the lust that we might experience. It is the temptation to deny our humanity and our calling as God’s own children. For us within the Christian Community, it is the denial of our baptism and our willingness to limit the scope of our discipleship. We will stand and say that Christ is Lord of our lives, but really? Every part of our lives? More often than not we give into the temptations and let the world define what it means to follow Christ today as his disciple.

Let me close on a personal note: This text is a tough one for pastors. We are not messiahs, by any means. Yet, we experience these same temptations and often succumb to them. “Turn this stone into bread.” Maybe not stones and bread, but we struggle with our need to be effective and meet “the needs” of people. We forget that the bread that our people need, may not always be what they want, and we often choose the path of least resistance, allowing our calling to be defined by a congregation and not by Christ.

We sin, but our most profound sins are not gluttony, lust, laziness or the like. Our profound sin is to deny our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Our profound sin is to settle for less in terms of our discipleship. Our profound sin was echoed by our brother Peter, three times on the night when Christ was arrested, “I don’t know him.” “I don’t know him.” “I don’t know him.”

We live in a modern wilderness and each day we hear the voices of the hidden persuaders: “Be this.” “Do this.” There is always a reward thrown in for good measure... “Be this... and you will be happy.” “Do this and you will have wealth.” The devil is so good at this, we don’t even know we are being tempted.

My hope is that during this season of Lent... you will listen for the world’s voices that try and lay claim on your life. The voices that try and define you, that tell you what is good and what is bad; the voices that limit choices. Listen for these voices, however attractive they may be....

And with Christ.... Resist. Amen.