

March 10, 2019

First Steps – Turn Stone into Bread

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be mediations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto thee.
O Lord, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

Each year, the first Sunday of lent the Gospel is always, Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. We hear it from different gospels every year. It's one of those that speaks deeply to me. The idea and the understanding that Jesus was truly and fully human. That is, that it's only by the human obedience to the divine that he can live a sinless and blameless life. And, it is through that obedience that he can offer to us salvation. And so, when I read about the temptations, I often emphasize how true a temptation it is. That Jesus could have said yes to any of those. And it was only through his obedience to the divinity within him that he was able to have the strength and the courage to say no. This year as I was reading the Gospel again, something that I thought about briefly in years past, suddenly, this kind of got my attention again, more than it had in the past.

And that was that the very first temptation that we hear. Jesus has gone into the wilderness right after his baptism. We're told for forty days and forty nights, or at forty days, he was fasting. He didn't eat anything during that time. And it was at this point that the devil comes to him to test him. And the first test seems kind of trivial to me. If you are the son of God, command this stone to become bread. What's the harm? You're hungry. You have this power, you have the power of God. Why not fulfill that hunger that you have? After all, I've looked through the ten commandments. And I've looked through the Levitical law and nowhere does it say thou shalt not turn stones into bread. It doesn't seem like that big a deal. And yet Jesus responds that he will not, because man does not live by bread alone.

I had to wrestle with that a little bit. Why was this a big deal? Why was this even a temptation? Why was this considered? Why would it be considered a sin to simply use the power at hand to fulfill not just a desire, but a need? He hadn't eaten in forty days. Then I started to think about how easy it is to misuse power. This was the power of God that was in the hands of a human being. And the temptation, although it seems trivial, was a step in the wrong direction. Was a step that Jesus would have taken to begin to use the power of God, rather than to be used as the vessel for God that he was called to be. It was not a very big thing. Seems trivial to us, but it was the first step.

And the more I thought about that, the more I thought how important taking that first step is, especially when that step is in the wrong direction. And I started to think about the things that are part of my life. Part of probably all our lives at some point or another about not doing

anything drastically sinful. But sometimes not doing things when we should or doing the little things that we know we shouldn't.

And it really took me back because of things that are going on in our society today. It took me back to when I was in high school. And remembering times when friends of mine, or people that I wanted to have as friends might be picking on another student at school. To my recollection, I didn't really join in on picking on or bullying another student. I was more on the side of the kid that was the most likely to be bullied or picked on but being complicit and not saying anything. I decided that was kind of like if Jesus had said, that's a good idea, I'm going to turn that stone into bread and that need would be filled. It's a step in the wrong direction. It was a step that says, this is okay. The fact that I don't say anything against it means that I think that somehow on some level this is okay. To make fun of another person, no matter what the issue was with the individual. They didn't quite fit in, they were too smart. They weren't handsome enough, pretty enough. They didn't participate in sports. They didn't do this, they didn't do that. And that was a reason to ridicule and bully and cast them out of the group. And if I was quiet, I didn't get expelled from the group and yet, but I was part of the problem.

I'd taken a step away from what God would have me be as a person who has made promises in our baptismal covenant about respecting the dignity of every human being. No, I didn't think of that as a kid. But reflecting on it now. I can see where that led to other things. Leads to laughing at jokes that are inappropriate because they're about gender, or they're about color, or they're about intelligence, or they're about being poor, not having the right clothes, and being in the right groups and such. Even as adults we grow up, and a lot of times we're not joining in when it comes to saying derogatory things about groups. Whether it be racial groups, economic groups, political groups, whatever. But just as sure as we don't say anything, we are being complicit. We are giving an allowance for it to go on.

What we are called to do as Christians, as citizens of the Kingdom of God is to say no. It's to say this is not appropriate. It's to say that there's nothing funny about these things and there is no reason to pick on someone or to cast them out of the group because they don't agree with what you think. And that's a very hard thing to do. But that is what it is to be obedient to God and not use the power that has been given to us to do harm. Because we can do harm in the things that we say and do. We do harm when we stand back and let injustices go unchecked. And what we have seen in our society in our day and age is that people are truly and profoundly being injured by these things. We see young people deciding that the despair is so great that the hatred that they feel from others turns into a self-hatred.

And it leads to any number of medical issues and from time to time it turns into such despair that they take their own lives rather than continue to deal with it from all the directions that it can come from. Because today it's almost impossible to get away from it. And even though we may not be the perpetrators, if we know it's going on, and I'm not talking just about children, but with one another, if we know it's going on and we don't say, stop, this is not right. Then it can infect us, and hate can begin to grow in our hearts. We can begin to see others as not worthy.

We back away from that promise in our baptismal covenant to respect the dignity of every human being, even though that person may be in some way, shape, or form an enemy, a declared designated enemy for some reason. We're called to respect the dignity of every human being. There aren't exceptions. And when we do not stand up, and vocalize that, when we don't confront those who find it so easy to disparage others. Then it can too easily become a part of our lives and we forget who we are. And who we are called to be.

Yesterday, we had a workshop here and I was working on my sermon. This has been an unusual week in that, you know, I had sermons, three services on Wednesday. I had a service yesterday for the reconciliation workshop. And so, my time for working on this sermon, came yesterday. And as I was thinking of all these things, I also knew that right in our parish hall, while I was sitting in my office were people who were willing to hear and listen. And to understand how easy it is to fall into those patterns of not seeing and not hearing and not confronting those things that bring people to breaking points because of race, because of gender identity, because of any number of reasons, religion, nationality.

And so, I just felt it was so important to be reminded of that during this season of Lent. To become sensitized again to the words that are being spoken by us and by the people around us. Where we must hear what is being said that hurts what Jesus called the least of these. Those people who weren't considered worthy to be a part of the society. Because we are called to take care of the least of these. Those who are widowed and orphaned, those who are sick, those who are in prison, those who are hungry and thirsty. We are called to be aware and to be aware of how they are being pushed away, rather than embraced. The temptation for Jesus to turn a stone into a loaf of bread doesn't seem like much. But it's one step and too often that one step leads to another, and that leads to another.

During this season of Lent, I invite you and encourage you to be very aware of the things that are being said and done around you. How it affects how you speak, how it affects how you think. And remember the vows you have made in your baptismal covenant. And to remember that Jesus invites into God's kingdom. Those who cared for the least of these, my brothers and sisters.