

Sermon for Lent I (C)
February 14, 2016
Trinity Parish, Seattle

[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#); [Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16](#); [Romans 10:8b-13](#); [Luke 4:1-13](#)

Welcome dear feast of Lent: who loves not thee,
He loves not Temperance, or Authority,
But is compos'd of passion.
(from George Herbert's poem, *Lent*)¹

Over the years I've had so many people say to me, "I just LOVE Lent!" Here in the Northern Hemisphere Lent is the time of year in traditional agrarian societies when you're running out of the winter stores and the greens have not yet sprouted in the earth and you're half starved. It's a fast imposed by the land and climate made holy by practice.²

"Welcome dear feast of Lent," says George Herbert.

I have a feeling that this is not what attracts us to it today. But perhaps it IS the making holy of something that we really do desire – a deep longing for an alternative way of being in the world. There is definitely something calling to us from the deep in this season.

And there just may be a clue to that on this first Sunday in Lent when we hear in the Gospel Jesus' epic confrontation with all manner of temptation. A brief scan of the ads on a typical half hour of television tells you right away that we live in a culture where giving in to temptation is not considered a vice, but a virtue.

We are regularly encouraged to "go ahead and treat yourself!" – pamper yourself, give in to temptation, and satisfy that desire. Advertisers are masters at the art of getting people to indulge their every desire. After all, you deserve it! You and your desires are the most important thing to consider! In fact, a lot of advertising is even calculated to help initiate desires that you didn't even know you had!

This is just one of many indications of our cultural obsession with self-gratification, self-indulgence, and even a kind of pervasive sense of entitlement to the things that make your life more easy or enjoyable or to be envied by others.

Seldom are we encouraged to resist temptation or question our desires. We learned from Freud not to trust anything that wants to repress our desires or our emotions. So, what do we do? We indulge them! To do otherwise would be... well, unnatural, and harmful to our

¹ *Lent*, by George Herbert (<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/lent-2/>)

² Suzanne Guthrie, *Edge of the Enclosure* (<http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/lent1c.html>)

psyches. This is the story we have been told, and by most indications, it has worked its way deeply into our lives.

Many of the messages we're sent in our culture are inspired by an economic system that demands continual growth through increased consumption. And so there's not much attention being paid to the difference between *true desire* and *false desire*. That would be bad for business!

But, there is a big difference. True desire is what we most *deeply* desire, below the level of conscious thought. It is our longing for connection and relationship, for fidelity and trust, for intimacy and love – ultimately what can only be described as our desire for life with God. Our false desires are the substitutes we use for satisfying this one true and deepest desire.

But such a distinction is often deliberately ignored in our culture, because satisfying our truest and deepest desire would almost never require us to buy anything, or go to a particular place, or to look a certain way. And so we buy into all kinds of false substitutes that satisfy us for a moment, but are rarely lasting.

From the beginning of the biblical story of human willfulness, we hear scripture speak of the “deep, insatiable human propensity to live out of sync with God through an uncontrolled ([and perhaps] uncontrollable?) desire.”³ Walter Brueggemann says that we are “propelled in ways that we do not understand to live in willful self-assertion or in willful abdication – either way refusing the covenantal, dialogical invitation to be God’s partner in the life of the world.”⁴ I think what he means by that is that we are often not conscious of just how much our own willfulness, our own certainty about what we think we really want, keep us from enjoying the life God really intends for us, because we’re more willing to settle for false substitutes than we are to check ourselves, and ask the hard questions, and to resist the temptation to settle for what is not real.

Katerina Whitley says that temptation is “...to be pulled away from our Creator by substituting the temporal for the eternal. We are pulled away from the purpose for which we were created: to live in God, to be one with God, to delight in God, to know the mind of God.”⁵

We can see this in the kinds of temptations we so often face:

- to spend what we do not have for things we do not need
- to substitute fleeting or illusory relationships for true commitment and fidelity
- to lie to ourselves (or even to others) about what we need or want
- to indulge our own desires without regard for the greater good or for the long term consequences of our actions

³ Walter Brueggemann, in “Trusting God’s Inexplicable Goodness”, *Sojourners* (March 2011, p. 48).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_127146_ENG_HTM.htm

Jesus' own temptation in the wilderness is a model for us. The story we heard from the gospel of Luke today shows Jesus as able to resist every tempting desire – even for things that were arguably and rightfully his. Who could fault him for desiring bread after fasting for forty days? Wasn't he in fact the Son of God, and couldn't he legitimately command the angels to bear him up? And how about all those kingdoms? Weren't they his anyway?

In each case, Jesus refused to submit to false desires or to substitute what was temporal for what was most enduring and true.

How can you and I learn to do the same?

We begin by recognizing that every desire we feel is rooted in something deep and profound that has to do with our life in God, and it is something we are being called to explore and to embrace. But we too easily satiate that desire with things that will not last, and in doing so we miss the opportunity to ask the deeper question: *what do I really, really desire?*

The answer to this question will ultimately lead us to a deeper life with God and to a place where the lie of false substitutes for God is exposed.

These forty days of Lent which we have just begun are an invitation to us to do just that. Our forty days of Lent are in some sense our own forty days with Jesus in the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed. One of the reasons we traditionally “give something up” for Lent is that it helps break through that part of our consciousness that says we're entitled to whatever we desire, and it enables us to ask the deeper question about where that desire really comes from, and what it is that will really and finally satisfy that desire. By the time Jesus faced his temptation, he knew the one primal truth about what was needed – and that was God alone. Nothing else, finally, could satisfy his one consuming desire – not recognition, not power, not even food itself. This knowledge was what would sustain him through his coming ministry and all that he would face both in life and in death.

This time of fasting – whether you're giving up something physical like food or drink, or some other thing that you desire – is meant to help us to say “no, thank you” to what is false in life, and “yes, please” to what is true. And in doing so we begin to have our deepest desires met.

George Herbert's Lent poem has another verse that says:

It's true, we cannot reach Christ's forti'eth day;
Yet to go part of that religious way,
Is better than to rest:
We cannot reach our Saviour's purity;
Yet we are bid, 'Be holy ev'n as he, '
In both let's do our best.