

in the eyes of all your peers.

But making those choices might help you to be the whole, faithful person God made you to be. One who has space and time left to build community, to pray for justice, to care about the world.

In the face of temptation, making choices like those will help us look more like the God in whose image we are made. A God who chose the cross as the way to save. A God whose power is found in mercy.

And it is to that God we give all glory and honor, thanks and praise, no matter how weak or strange that makes us look. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

March 6, 2022

First Sunday in Lent

Good Enough: "Who God Made Us"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Luke 4:1-13

Raise your hand if you like Trader Joe's? Me, too. There's something that just feels good about shopping in that store - the friendly workers in their happy, Hawaiian shirts, great products, and the cheap wine doesn't hurt either! I recently read a sort of business strategy memoir by the actual Trader Joe himself, Joe Coulombe. Coulombe sold the business a number of years ago, but as I read his book, I was surprised at how much of what he had created at Trader Joe's still exists. Those shirts for one thing. But especially, his commitment to paying his employees well. They are said to make really decent wages that you can actually live on.

After Coulombe built the business starting in the 1960s, a number of buyers came knocking over the years, wanting to take Trader Joe's off his hands for handsome sums of money. It was tempting to sell to them. He and his family were not really living high on the hog, despite the stores doing well. So the thought of an easy life and lots of golf was pretty appealing. But almost none of the buyers were willing to uphold Coulombe's standard of pay for employees. The prospective buyers didn't get on board with his philosophy around worker pay, or with a lot of the other strategies he felt were important for morale, the bottom line, and good business practice. So, Joe stayed the course and rode the waves of the changing economy.

Finally, in the late 1980s, when he encountered a German company interested in purchasing the chain, he found a common interest. This one was willing to maintain the commitment to high employee compensation, for the long-term. So Trader Joe went forward with the sale of his beloved business. Joe chose that buyer because it helped him do right by others, not just for himself. To the rest of the world, his commitment to paying employees more may have seemed a strange choice; a weak one or even a bad business decision. But our raised hands show that what may have seemed weak, proved powerful in the end.

The temptation for Joe to give into his commitments or to sell to the absolute highest bidder was not unreasonable. Plenty of business people do

¹ Matt Fitzgerald, "Homiletical Perspective, Luke 4:1-13," *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 93.

² Fitzgerald, 97.

that and we often admire them for their savvy. When the devil showed up and started speaking to Jesus, the same was true. As commentator Matt Fitzgerald says, “Satan does not look monstrous. He looks reasonable. Most of our temptations are.”¹ Jesus getting himself something to eat after a long period of fasting, that would be understandable. Wanting some glory and prestige, well that always feels good. These were activities that Jesus would do in other ways later on in his ministry anyway: feeding a multitude of people, showing his glory through the cross and the empty tomb.

The temptation, though, was not just to do these things outright, to get those end results of bread and glory. The temptation was especially for Jesus to misuse the power he had; to take advantage of who he was and exert his strength to the fullest. Though it’s terrible to say, I think we expect that from people in power today and I suspect that’s true throughout history. We expect that powerful people will take advantage of whatever position they have and use it for their own benefit. Or for the benefit of someone close to them. The massive college admissions cheating scandal of recent years is such a clear example of this kind of behavior. Actors and CEO’s paid large sums of money to ensure that *their* kids got extra time or scored high on college entrance exams in order to gain admission to elite colleges and universities. Learning about this made many of us feel ill, as we saw how they used their wealth and power to get special access, which others sacrifice so much to attain.

In contrast, the story of Jesus gives us a portrait of integrity and dignity. Ever quick with a come-back, Jesus did not let the devil’s ideas - reasonable or not - draw him in. He refused the kind of power and advantage that was on offer. Jesus embraced who God made him to be. He was the only Son of God. And that was enough. He did not need to prove anything else to the devil or to himself. He did not need to be anyone else. But Jesus didn’t do this just through a steely resolve or by white-knuckling it so he could say ‘no’ to the devil. (The story doesn’t encourage those things for us, either.) This story is a picture of God-incarnate gently embodying love and contentment. Jesus did not need what the devil offered in order to be whole. God had made him whole and good and full of love, just as he was.

Through Jesus’ choice, we learn something about God. We learn that God’s power is different from might or strength. As Fitzgerald says, Jesus chooses a way of being “that makes the cross inevitable.”² As we begin this season of Lent, we begin making our way slowly toward the cross. We are heading toward that place where Jesus will make another choice, and even more will be revealed about his power, which looks a lot more like vulnerability. In the temptation and at the cross, we will watch Jesus show us the strength that comes from refusing power. Jesus knew that his ministry would be sufficient, just the way God had intended it. It would be enough to

preach love and mercy through a human body that could itself be broken. And doing that would indeed be powerful enough to transform the world.

God made each of us to be enough, just as we are. When we know that, when we believe that, then we do not need to gain more power or strength to become whole. We do not need to take advantage of our position, or of anyone else, in order to be better off in life. When we are content with who God made us to be, then we, too, can choose vulnerability over might. In refusing the deals from the most lucrative buyers, Trader Joe chose his values over ultimate wealth. He was content with who he was. In refusing Satan’s offers, Jesus chose his mission of love over worldly power.

Especially when we are in times of wilderness - times when we feel alone, adrift, when chaos has come to reign, something like the devil may show up in our lives. It might look like the pressure that social media imposes on us, from the perfect-looking lives of other parents to people enjoying what appears to be a carefree retirement. It might look like the voices from your own family that you’ve never been able to escape: the ones that said what your life *should have* been like, if you’d done it right. The temptations might be to *do more*: to turn the rough stones of your life into diamonds through more and more effort. Or to *have more*: to find work that gives you more buying power, no matter what it costs in your health and time. Or to *be more*: to find that sunny attitude that supposedly will save you from the depression you feel or the diagnosis you have or the circumstances you are facing. This story of Jesus facing these temptations is both a world away and also very close to home.

Now Jesus was God’s own child; God in human form. So of course, *he* was enough just as he was. *He* was able to embrace his identity and vocation in a way that allowed him to refuse the temptation. But we are the stuff of God, too. That’s what we remembered on Ash Wednesday. *We* are the dust God gathered from the earth, and breathed life into. We are the ones whose every hair is numbered by God. And yes, to the dust we will one day return; that is a hard truth worth telling and one that keeps us humble. But we are beloved dust. Dust that God created to receive and share love and mercy.

So in the temptations we face, we do not have to seek more or better; we do not have anything to prove. That knowledge allows us to make choices that might seem vulnerable. They might even look weak, to the rest of the world. Yet those might be the faithful choices:

Saying no to a fancy but stressful new job might make you look vulnerable to your colleagues.

Refusing to join in on the gossip chain might make you seem like the odd-ball.

Choosing a college that’s right for you rather than one whose name signals prestige, might seem strange to your teachers and friends.

Limiting your kids’ extracurricular activities, to focus on rest and family instead of college prep, might make you look ill-prepared for the future