

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent Communion Service March 13, 2011
Lessons: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

HARD BUT LIBERATING CHOICES

At first reading, Jesus' temptations seem unique to him as God's Son and Israel's Messiah. Who else would be tempted to command stones to turn into loaves of bread or to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple expecting to land unharmed? True, others in our history have set out to conquer the world's kingdoms, but neither you nor I aspire to being the next Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar. All in all, these three temptations seem quite exclusive, designed for no one but Jesus who has just come from his baptism, having heard the voice from heaven declare of him, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Is this lesson solely about the struggles of Jesus Christ, Son of God, or does it have something to help me with my much smaller and more commonplace struggles in life?

I do not read Jesus' temptations as a once-and-done event but rather as the distillation of the choices he makes throughout his adult life and ministry right up to time of his agonized prayer in the Gethsemane. Even on trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus refuses to accept the identity of a would-be king, not because he is trying to dodge the consequences, but because he wants no part of power and dominion over earth's people.

Sadly, the church would later present Jesus Christ as the Caesar of All Caesars for its own purposes of power and glory, but he himself was never any such thing nor wished to be nor will ever be. But however much power and glory Christendom gained by force and intrigue, there would always be within Christianity what Martin Luther would call "the thin tradition" of faithful people who would choose the humble way of service without power or glory. That choice must still be made. For Christianity as well as the world, wide is the road that leads to destruction and many take it, but narrow the path that leads to life and few find it – because few care to seek it. Belligerent Christian faith is a self-contradiction, but pious anger fueled by pride and shame is always a danger to believers.

Jesus' temptations are not exclusively his. They are very human temptations, and he meets them as the human being who must choose between God and his own ego. In the Genesis story of Eden, humanity chooses to "be as gods knowing good and evil" and so falls into shame at its own creaturely nakedness. As our own false gods, we live on an axis that runs between pride and shame because we cannot make peace with ourselves as we truly are. Jesus was crucified because he offended the pride of the good, religious people. He refused

to set himself above the rest of us. That is the meaning of his Incarnation and its significance to us and our world – not that he is the veiled God hiding his splendor and majesty while only seeming human but that he is the true human person who walks humbly with his God, who came “not to be served but serve and to give his life” to restore us to God, to each other, and to our true selves.

There is no greater freedom than that which comes as we are liberated from the false pride and the shame which are really two faces of the same thing. Apart from God, we become pretenders who fear being revealed as we truly are. So we compete for pride to cover our shame. Yes, Jesus is special to God, most special – “my Son, the Beloved.” But we don’t understand that to God’s love, each of us is unique, irreplaceable, and beloved. In the sibling rivalry into which we have fallen by denying our relationship with God, one must be greater by making others lesser, and so we hear our leaders and wealthy folk speak in what they imagine to be benevolence of taking care of the “little people.” Just as pride and shame are two faces of the same thing, so are benevolence and tyranny. If you don’t believe me, offend the benefactor by insisting upon your right to speak up for yourself and demand respect, and see how quickly the face of benevolence turns ugly. The high and mighty require that the recipients of their largesse be grateful and submissive.

Imagine being able to look into the mirror and see nothing that triggers shame or shame’s type of pride, either. As I said in our service Ash Wednesday evening, there is a pride that is the opposite of humility, and that kind of pride is arrogance; there is also a pride that is the opposite of shame and not merely shame’s other face. This second kind of pride is the confidence and peace of the person who trusts God and receives life thankfully as God’s gift each day. For this type of pride, other people are no threat simply because they are other. People who are different trigger no scorn because this pride does not require that differences show inferiority. If only I can have this second kind of pride that is not shame’s other face, then my school, my team, my town, my country, my church, my religion, my skin color, my holidays, and my gender do not have to be the best, the greatest, the most powerful, or the most praised. I do not need to take opinions that differ from mine as jealousy. In fact, I do not need to see why anyone would be jealous of me, because I now feel no need to be jealous of anyone else. The jealousy of others is no longer something I desire or need to feel good about myself.

If only. If only I could have this second, honest kind of pride and feel no shame at being who I am, but I know quite well I am not yet that free. Those who believe pride must be competitive will, of course, insist that if I were that free of shame, then I would be lazy, unproductive, and worthless. To those who think they are winning or still might win the contest of pride and shame, the thought that human life could be cooperative rather than competitive seems the greatest heresy of all.

When we come together to the Lord's table, we confess that God is not yet finished with us but welcomes us even now as we are. We are not yet free from guilt or shame; neither are we yet free from shame-pride's fear of others who are different or from shame's anger at those we blame for our pride's uncertainty about itself. But here in the Communion of bread and wine – of Jesus' broken body and shed blood – we are affirmed as belonging to the love of God for which we were created. As we eat and drink, we say, however weakly, however hesitantly, however unsurely, "Yes, we belong here with you, Jesus, because you bring us here despite all our contradictions."

Belonging to God's grace does not take away our choices but strengthens us to be more faithful in making them and sooner to recover when we go wrong. When trust in God and thankfulness for God's daily gift of life drive our choices, then shame's pride is pushed away. Of course, it will wait for an opportune time to tempt us again, but we have a Redeemer who will stick with us and hold on to us until we recover and trust God again. God is leading us forward, no matter how small our steps, and we don't need to beat anybody else because it's not a race. Let's just keep our eyes on the freedom to which Jesus calls us and trust him; then the choices of responding to God's love rather to the temptations of our own egos will come more and more naturally to us, and we won't even need to be proud of it. Amen.