

Sermon

St. Paul's Church, North Andover

Lent 1- March 5, 2017

“Let us pray.....May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord...my rock and my redeemer.” Amen.

Good Morning! It is a pleasure to be with you at St. Paul's this morning.

[Introduction]

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and our gospel reading this morning from Matthew is the temptation story. *After* Jesus is baptized, *during* his 40 day fast in the wilderness, and *before* he begins his public ministry, he is approached by the devil and tempted with three different scenarios. Three ways to separate Jesus from the love of God. Remember, just before this happened, God had proclaimed that Jesus was his beloved son, with whom he was well-pleased. The devil in the story tries to get Jesus to do things that are world-centered and not God-centered, things that would suggest that love is more self-fulfilling and not the holy, unconditional, and vast love that God had for Jesus, and has for us.

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Henri Nouwan, a Dutch Catholic priest, writer, and theologian, interpreted the three temptations as follows:

1. turning stones into bread symbolizes the temptation to believe that “I am what I do”- that I will only be loved for what I accomplish in this world. Jesus could have very easily performed the miracle of turning stones into bread, but he resisted, knowing that it was more important for him to fast and prepare himself for what lay ahead. He didn't have to perform a miracle in order for God or anyone else to love him and to see his relevance in the world.
2. jumping off the temple- This, according to Nouwan, symbolizes the temptation to prove one's worthiness by being spectacular- imagine what people will say when they hear of this amazing feat! In other words, the devil tempted Jesus to believe that he would only be great and worthy if people said good things about him.
3. Finally, the temptation to worship things other than God. To place worldly things before holy. To have it all and feel powerful.

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I think it's safe to say that as human beings, we can relate to these three temptations.

“I am what I do.”

“I am what others say I am.”

“I am what I have.”

How easy it is to feel loved, relevant, worthy, only when others see us in a certain light, or when we accumulate material goods and warped ideas that make us feel good about ourselves. Imagine, though, what it must feel like to be able to resist all of that because you know- you just know- how much you are beloved by God, and that's all that matters. Jesus knew this and modeled for us what God wants for us- to know and feel that we **are** truly the beloved children of God, too. And that nothing we do can change the love that God has for us.

I'd like to talk about Global Mission now in the context of these three temptations. Before joining God's mission in the greater world, it is so important to ground our thoughts and our actions about what we do in a

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deeper sense of discerning "What is **God** calling us to do- to be in the world, as followers of Jesus Christ." It's a question that must be wrestled with, as Jesus wrestled with the devil in the wilderness. Otherwise, the consequences of our mission can be at best ineffective, and at worse, actually harmful.

My first introduction to global mission was in 2006, when I went on my first short-term mission trip with a team from St. Paul's Church in Dedham, my home parish before I became a deacon. My husband had gotten our parish involved with a small nonprofit organization in Haiti through his cousins who had been working in a rural village, about 50 miles outside of Port-au-Prince. It was both a medical and an educational mission.

From the very beginning, I loved being in Haiti. I loved the warmth and hospitality of the people. I loved helping out in the medical clinic, even though I was not a medically trained person. I loved the fact that we were lugging- literally- a truckload of suitcases filled with medical supplies, clothing, shoes, toothbrushes and toothpaste, for surely the residents of

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this extremely poor community could use them. And I loved the idea of sponsoring students, as we did, in schools.

Since that first trip in 2006, I've gone back dozens of times to this village, called Juampas. My experiences there are, I believe, prompted my call to the ministry of the diaconate- I felt drawn to go into the world and serve the needs of the people, and bring the needs of the people into the church.

But also since that first trip, my whole understanding of what I believe that God is calling us to do...or more importantly, to **be**...in the greater world has changed dramatically. The changes can perhaps be illustrated by comparing them with the temptations of Christ:

The stones to bread story...or, we are we do. A major criticism of short-term mission trips over the past 20 years or so is that they tend to be focused on what the mission teams sets out to accomplish. The projects. Build a clinic! Paint a school! Sponsor 50 children! We see our value and our worth in what we perceive to be the things we're doing that make

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others' lives better. The problem with this is, we are learning now that we Americans often set out to do things without consulting our hosts! We see a problem and we want to fix it. My mission team and myself did this over and over, until things fell apart and we were forced to go back and discern- what is God's mission here in Juampas, not OUR mission. For example, we had a malaria bed net program. We would bring dozens of nets down and go hut to hut, with translators, showing the residents how to put up the nets and use them. But when we went back to see how they were working, we discovered that often, they weren't! People would sell their nets to buy food- that was more of a priority- or they would use their nets for other purposes- or they might be using them correctly except they would get torn, and they didn't have the knowledge or means to repair them. Our project did not provide the results we'd hoped for.

The jumping off the temple story...or, the temptation to believe that we are what people say we are. Mission teams get lots of attention. We get attention from our fellow parishioners, from our families, neighbors, and friends, and from the our partners in the places where we serve.

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Sometimes, it can feel awfully good to be seen as the ones who are doing good in the world. The book Toxic Charity talks about the t-shirts that mission teams often wear as they go on their trips- I've worn them myself. But sometimes, the t-shirts have a Bible verse on them that can be offensive. I actually saw a group in the airport in PAP with t-shirts that said "Haiti Mission Trip- Bringing the light of Christ into the darkness." It sounds nice at first, but the implication is that we, the Americans, have the light of Christ, and that you- the Haitians, are the darkness. You Haitians need us to show you the way of Christ. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth! It is the Haitians, with their deep and abiding faithfulness to God, that inspire us to be better Christians.

3. And finally, third temptation- the temptation for power over others. I think the motivations of most Christians on mission are basically good. We don't go into the world hoping to have power and control over our partners. We do seek relationships that are authentic and God-centered...why else would be going out of our way to places that are often uncomfortable and even hard to reach? The power issue is often subtle. It took me awhile to

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get this. I didn't realize the power and authority we had when we were in Juampas. We were seen as kind Americans, yes, with big hearts- all good, but also as a ticket out of poverty, something that we could never be in reality. People would approach us all the time and ask us for money, for Visas to America, for material items, and sometimes we would give those things,

honestly because we felt it was the right thing to do. God wants us to give to the poor. But by giving to some and not to others-even, for example, sponsoring students in school, we inadvertently created power structures that were unfair. We tended to give more to the young men who spoke English and would approach us with requests. It seems obvious now, but again, we didn't realize the impact until later. I wish that we had spent more time in prayer, in reflection, and in discernment before, during, and on our trips.

The good news is that over the years, we have. I'm still involved in this mission even though my home parish St. Paul's has moved on to other things. I see now that the focus on mission should be on the relationships with our partners, and not the projects. Relationships that have healthy

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boundaries. The focus should be the journey, and not the accomplishments. The acknowledgment that we are being transformed as we enter into a context that is different than our own, and it is that transformation by God that helps us to be more effective in our mission.

I know that you, St. Paul's, are discerning mission in the greater world. We are going to talk about it in further detail during coffee hour. You are already off to a great start- I could tell by the language that Cheryl Means used in an email to me- referring to a trip as a pilgrimage. I want to know more about that trip, and I hope you'll tell me during coffee hour. And I will share with you how God is inspiring congregations in our diocese to go into the world and be a part of God's mission. I look forward to our continued conversation!

May God bless each of you and your whole community on your mission journey. Amen.