

*Sermon, Lent 1*

*March 5, 2017*

*Holy Spirit*

Thirty three years ago, I preached my first sermon. I thought of it this week because the Gospel that day was the passage we just heard. I was in discernment for ordination in the Diocese of Atlanta in 1983-84 and one of the parts of the process was to be assigned to a parish to see how my calling would fit in a real, live parish that was not my home parish. And part of that assignment included getting to preach on a Sunday.

Now thirty three years ago, I was a lot younger than I am now. And the night before the Sunday I was to preach, I remember looking at a stack of index cards in which I had written down various notes and topics I wanted to cover. And I was stuck. More than stuck—I was panicky. And Lynn saw my anxiousness and really helped me out. She asked me, “What is it you want to say?” That simple direction and some patient listening on Lynn’s part helped me to sort out what was important and what was real. And the sermon the next day actually went well.

Lynn’s advice from thirty three years ago still applies today. It is actually consistent with what I learned in my preaching class in seminary. Begin with a purpose statement in mind when you preach and then you will at least have a good chance of saying something that makes sense so that my words do not get in the way of what people hear from the Spirit.

So preparing to preach on the Gospel for today, one thing stood out to me about this story of temptation: the role of **conversation** in the temptation of Jesus. When we think of temptation, many of us see it as a passing thought or a quick image that distracts us; or of a growing obsession that really throws us off track. And of course that can be the case.

When I consider this Gospel, what is known as “the Temptation of Jesus,” what I read is that the temptation unfolded in the back and forth style of conversation that turned into a contest of wills and opinion. And that brought me to what our country has been experiencing over the past several months.

You know what I am talking about—a longtime friend or family member or even fellow parishioner makes a statement. You hear and fail in your attempt to count to ten before responding and so you say something that conflicts with or contradicts that person’s statement. Then you know the face the other person makes—a raised eyebrow, a flushed face, perhaps a stammer—then that person responds in kind. And before you know it, a relationship is strained or damaged or even lost because of a conflict in how we see the world. And in some sense, that is the temptation of our day.

The temptation many folks face is what to do about it. There are different responses we can choose. We can double down on the debate approach and try to prove our point to the

other person. Has anyone tried that approach and had it work for them and their relationship? Unlikely.

Another common response is to change the subject and just never bring up a controversial topic with that person again. Future conversations focus on children and grandchildren and puppies and kittens and so forth. That is probably the safest and most common response. But to some degree, the relationship that has that type of focus will eventually grow less vital and may even wither and die.

So is there another way to have conversations without these temptations and make them less of a strain on our common life? I believe there is and that our Lord's conversation with the devil shows the way. Now to be clear, I do not think we need to cast someone with whom we disagree as the devil. Rather the temptation for us is in the quality of our conversation with people.

How did our Lord hold his temptation conversation? There are three main components that help guide us in how we converse with others so that we can avoid the dangers of growing hostility and the breakdown of important relationships.

First, Jesus knew who he was. That was how the devil first tempted him, "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus was not having that. He did not need to prove himself to anyone. His faith in God was deep and sustaining so that no matter what he might face in life, that reality of his identity was foundational.

And so it is with us. As we go through this season of Lent, let us remember how deeply we are loved by God. Also, how deeply our conversation partner is loved by God! If we have that truth clear in our hearts, then our engagement with others does not need to be about proving I am right and they are wrong about any topic we may discuss.

Second, Jesus knew the Scripture. When the devil attacked him, Jesus could say, "It is written..." Now that does not mean that we need to pull out our Bibles so we can better defeat someone else's argument. There are few things more tedious in life than someone using the Bible that way.

But we can be so grounded in our knowledge of Scripture that we know what matters in life. If we live our lives only on what we hear or read from pundits, then we will lose our way. We become angry and reactive. But if we immerse ourselves in Scripture, study it in community and with prayer and wise scholarship, then that practice will help us to find our way. The prayerful, communal study of Scripture can make us wise, humble, and confident in our conversations with others.

I know not all of us have the time to take EFM (Education for Ministry) or come to Bible study or other study programs. I highly recommend those if you can. But until that is a realistic option, there are things you can do.

As Mother Bonnie mentioned last week, there are apps for our phones and tablets that can help us read and pray through Scripture. These include Forward Day by Day and Mission St. Clair. We can hook you up with that if you need help. I send out a weekly email called “Lessons & Questions” that provides a link to the coming Sunday’s lessons and some questions to help you engage the Scripture. Or for Lent, you can simply decide to read one of the Gospels or the Psalms—just a portion or two every day. All of these options help you to begin to be immersed in Scripture, prayer, and community in a way that can help you think and speak differently.

Third, Jesus knew these conversations and temptations were not about him. And he is the Messiah, the Son of God! So when the devil tried to get Jesus to jump from a high place to prove he was God’s Son, Jesus was not having it. He did not have to prove himself to be who he is (remember point one). Making himself the center of attention was not the answer. He knew his life and his conversation were about God and God’s purpose, God’s kingdom coming and God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

So again to bring this lesson down to us and our real world conversations, let us always remember it is not about us or our winning a point with someone. That temptation can escalate into more and more vitriol and less and less honest compassion. So when we become engaged in a heated conversation, learn to step back. Try to say something like, “Thank you for letting me know your point of view.” I have been using that one a lot lately. Change the subject or walk away—until another time.

Why this approach matters is that it acknowledges the temptation in the moment— our words can become too heated and damage can be done to a relationship. This does not mean we cannot be honest about our faith and our experience of life. It does mean that we can choose the times to speak, hopefully listening to the Spirit. When we do speak that way, people may still get upset—but at least we are speaking clearly and not in angry reaction to someone else.

Conversations are difficult right now. It is often hard for your preachers as we try to preach consistent with the truth of the gospel without trying to aggravate people. So pray for us. But I have hope that God can speak through us—and not only us as preachers but through all of us as we take time to remember who we are, immerse ourselves in Scripture, and remember it is not just about us.

The example of Lynn’s conversation with me that night before my first sermon is one we could all follow. When someone is anxious or upset, ask a question, “What are you trying to say?” Listen. Be kind. Pray. The truth that is in someone, sometimes gets tangled up in their words and emotions. Be a patient friend and conversation partner. That is how we can grow closer to God and one another. Amen.