

Lent 1, 2017
Temptation
The Rev. Sue Sommer

John Dominic Crossan has been something of a controversial figure over the years, but here's a sample of something he wrote that might find traction with us this morning. He writes,

“On the one hand, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European Enlightenment correctly “enlightened” us on the necessity of observation and experimentation in the physical sciences and the value of reason and debate, proof and repetition in science and technology. In that process, [the church’s] power and control were removed from spheres about which,[it] knew too little and claimed too much. That was a magnificent achievement and must always be appreciated as such.

On the other hand, the Enlightenment also dramatically “endarkened” us on metaphor and symbol, myth and parable, especially in religion and theology. We judge, for example, that the ancients took their religious stories literally, but that we are now sophisticated enough to recognize their delusions. What, however, if those ancients intended and accepted their stories as metaphors or parables, and we are the mistaken ones? What if those pre-Enlightenment minds were quite capable of hearing a metaphor, grasping its meaning immediately and its content correctly, and never worrying about the question: Is this literal or metaphorical?¹

I suggest that our reading from Genesis today is Example A of what Crossan is speaking of. The story of the Garden of Eden reveals something important about humankind's desires, and of our susceptibility to derail our best and highest goals with short term expediency. The story tells us that even in paradise, where every need was anticipated and met, and where one thing alone was forbidden, that forbidden thing will take hold of our imaginations and turn us away. Genesis said that the woman saw that the fruit appealed to her hunger, it was a delight to her eyes, and that it would make her wise. Filling the hunger, sating the desire to possess, appealing to our need to be more than who we are. That's how temptation overtook the first humans, according to the story. And we get that. Because we see it every day. In our crimes and in our misdemeanors, throughout our history and in the present moment, temptation always hooks our hunger, our desire to possess, our need to be more than who we are.

It's an old story. It was an old story by the time Jesus appeared on the scene. As Matthew tells it, Jesus was still damp from the Jordan River when he was led into the Judean wilderness to be tempted. And what does the tempter try to hook him with? His hunger (stones into bread), his desire to possess (kingdoms of the world), his need to be more than who he was (angels to bear him up from a pinnacle free-fall). Matthew tells us that the temptation came to Jesus at the end of the 40 day fast, when he was famished, when he was most vulnerable, when he was most susceptible to the tempter.

Kind of like us when we're Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired, and our addictions beckon. Kind of like us when we're burned out and bereft of spiritual resources and we lash out at someone else because it's easier than dealing with the root problem. Kind of like us when we find ourselves backed into a corner and we take the easy way out with a fib rather than come clean. Kind of like us when an opportunity presents itself to cheat with impunity and we do because the fruits of winning

¹ Crossan, John Dominic. *The Greatest Prayer: A Revolutionary Manifesto and Hymn of Hope*, Harper One, 2010.

are sweet, we believe, even if it costs us our integrity.

Hunger, the desire to possess, the need to be more than who we are. It is as though we humans are hard wired with these longings. Satisfying them with the wrong choices – sometimes even destructive choices – is something that we do all the time.

Jesus shows us another way. That's the lasting import of this story. Consider it Example B of what Crossan is talking about. From the beginning, God endowed humanity with the capacity to choose how to use our creative powers, not only to create new life, but also to shape the world. God calls us to use this gift to build and not to destroy. That's true whether we're talking about how we determine national or international policy or how we treat the bodies God gave us. Jesus's encounter with the tempter in the wilderness shows us what right choices look like. But it wasn't about willpower. Jesus made those right choices because he went into the wilderness with his heart and mind firmly centered on who he was and whose he was.

Many of us choose to refrain from some habitual food or activity during Lent. It's a useful exercise when we see it as the means to an end, and not as an end in itself. The discomfort that we feel during this time of discipline highlights for us how temptations great and small overtake us: to fill the hunger, to satisfy the desire to possess, to need to be more than who we are. The longings themselves are not intrinsically wrong. In fact, you could argue that we have survived as a species precisely because of these instinctual longings. They are the stuff of humanity.

It's just that when we center our lives in God, then – and frankly, *ONLY* then – do we have the *context* for what to do with all that stuff that we seem to be hard-wired with. When we center our lives in God, we find that we have the capacity to honor our hunger through careful stewardship. We have the capacity to focus our desire for possession in terms of possessing first the love of God. We have the capacity for allowing the Holy Spirit to work within us to make us most fully the persons God created us to be.