



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist
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The Rev. Thomas M. White, Rector

Homily for I Lent

March 10, 2019

Text: Luke 4:1-13

Let us pray: Gracious God, mighty fortress, the struggle between good and evil rages within and around us, and the devil and all the powers that defy you tempt us with empty and fleeting promises. Keep us steadfast in your word and, when we fall, raise us up and restore us by your grace; through the redeeming Christ. Amen.

Perhaps you read this week about a boy, only nine years old, William McLeod. On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, William showed up at his fourth-grade class with a cross of ashes on his forehead. I believe most boys nine years old might be embarrassed by the ashen cross and would have wiped it off before going to school. Instead William was embarrassed when the teacher told him the cross was "inappropriate," handed him a wet wipe, and ordered him to remove the cross from his forehead in front of the class. This, even after William told his teacher that it was Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, the season when, in William's words, "we seek to get closer to God." Thankfully William's teacher was later contrite, repenting of our wrongdoing, and wrote William a letter of apology, asking his forgiveness, which, my guess is, William gave.

I begin this homily with William because his teacher forced him to wipe from his forehead the symbol of William's Christian identity. And that's exactly what Satan is tempting Jesus to do in the Gospel reading we just heard, seeking to undermine and wipe away Jesus' identity as the Son of God. That's why the devil prefaces the temptations with: "If you are the Son of God..." Remember, these temptations immediately follow Jesus' baptism, when the very voice of God boomed from the heavens: "You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased!" And then the temptations: "If you are the Son of God..." Yes, at the heart of every temptation, Jesus' or ours, is Satan attempting to woo us, often seductively, from our allegiance to God, from our trust that we, by grace alone, are beloved children of God, God's daughters and sons.

The devil tries to seduce Jesus with the promise of bread when Jesus is famished, with the power and glory of all the world's kingdoms, and with the temptation to test God's promise to keep Jesus safe. But the bottom line of Satan's every temptation, whether it be bread, power, and safety; or wealth, fame, security, youth, and beauty, is to turn us away from God, to worship Satan instead. Satan, you see, is the master of identity theft!

That's an essential reason why we gather for worship each Sunday: to worship the Lord our God, to stay plugged into God, that we might serve only God. We gather each Lord's day to be reminded of, and to be assured anew, of our identity as the cherished children of God. We come together to be told in God's Word and Supper that God loves us more than anything, loves us enough for God to send and sacrifice God's beloved Son, who takes on our lot and life, who suffers every pain and trauma we endure, all and only that we may know God is with us and for us no matter what. And to be assured that God raised this Son from death to demonstrate that God's love is greater than any sin, stronger than all hatred, more powerful than the worst evil, triumphant even over death, victorious even over Satan!

At this point let me depart for a moment from this Gospel reading and speak a word about the Second Lesson, from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. In the closing verses of this reading, St. Paul makes a bold witness to inclusiveness: "the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls

on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Everyone! You have heard me testify from this pulpit numerous times that I believe with all my heart and soul that God calls us to welcome everyone, everyone who enters this sanctuary seeking Jesus. And, I believe, God calls us to extend the gracious hospitality of Christ himself to them. And this church is adding to our numbers because you're doing it! Visitors tell me consistently that they come back because you make them feel so welcomed.

Needless to say, therefore, I was disheartened and discouraged by the recent vote of the Methodist Church, meeting in convention, to exclude LGBTQ Christians from its Gospel ministry and, by extension, saying to LGBTQ Christians that they are not welcome in Methodist congregations. A Methodist Church near my home, in the wake of this decision by the Methodist Convention, put up a welcoming sign which says, "All Means All!" I applaud this church's witness of welcome for all; but, sorry, the fact remains, that church is part of a denomination that has decided that all does not mean all. It's a denomination that has the audacity to think that who is welcomed by God's grace can be put up for a vote, or that whom to exclude can be voted on. The wideness of God's mercy cannot be narrowed by a vote; the lavishness of God's grace cannot be limited by a vote! No denomination is perfect, ours included, but I hope all of us are proud to belong to a national church which not only talks the talk, but walks the walk in affirming that, yes, all are welcomed, and, yes, "all means all!" By the way, Deacon Paula's "Walking by Faith" videos, each of which ends with this welcome: "In the Episcopal Church all are welcome, no exceptions!" is being heard and applauded by many of our sister parishes in this Episcopal Diocese of Delaware, and was recently included in one of Bishop Brown's weekly video messages.

Returning to the Gospel text, a strong deterrent to succumbing to the devil's temptations is to be busy with the works of Christ, serving our neighbors who are in need. When you're busy doing God's work it's less likely the devil will be able to tempt you to turn away from God. When you're focused on the needs of others, you're less anxious for your own. A focus of this holy season of Lent is self-denial through acts of charity. So, on each of the six Sundays in Lent each of you will receive a Circle of Kindness card. The idea is to observe a holy Lent by looking for an opportunity each week to perform a random act of kindness. It might be taking an infirmed neighbor to a doctor's appointment, or preparing a casserole for a friend grieving the loss of a loved one, or simply offering to pay for the coffee of the stranger ahead of you in the line at Wawa. After doing the random act of kindness, you're asked to hand the person you've helped the Circle of Kindness card and to encourage them to "pay it forward" and, when they do, passing the card on to the person they've helped. Who knows, it's conceivable that you could receive your card back! In the process, with our church's information on the card, those to whom you show kindness will know that the Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist is a genuinely caring community. And please share your random acts of kindness on our parish's Facebook page.

The cross of ashes which marked William McLeod's forehead was wiped off Ash Wednesday; ours are gone as well. But, here's the thing, the moment we and William McLeod were baptized into Christ Jesus another cross was marked, this one with holy oil, also on our foreheads, as a priest spoke our name and these words: "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever...forever!" In that baptismal moment we received an indelible, non-erasable identity, we, the beloved of God, God's son or daughter. Oh yes, this First Sunday in Lent reminds us that Satan is non-stop busy in seeking to convince us to turn our backs on that identity as God's very own. And when we do, but then come to our senses and realize that without God we are nothing, God the Father, like the loving father in the parable of the prodigal son, waits to greet us with merciful forgiveness immeasurably wide, to embrace us with grace unimaginably lavish and without limit, as Christ's Body and Blood through bread and wine bear everlasting witness!

† In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.