

Sermon: Our two questions for Lent

Over the last several years I've begun to see and understand Lent and temptations, and the struggles in my life in a different way.

It used to be that I thought about those things in terms of self-denial: just say no, don't do this, don't do that; and everything will be fine. But then life got complicated. It wasn't that simple or easy. Just say no and self-denial were no longer enough. I don't mean that I exchanged self-denial for self-indulgence. I am saying that our lives deserve and demand more than just say no.

I suspect we've all had times and experiences in our lives when "just say no" did not apply. It just wasn't relevant because the issue wasn't a yes or no kind of question. Or maybe there were times when the rules simply didn't cover or speak to the situation. What then? Where do we turn?

There have also been times when I followed the rules. I did the right thing. I said, "No." I was who I was supposed to be and did what I was supposed to do. Despite all that it didn't work out the way I wanted or thought it would or should. Something was amiss or lacking. There was no sense of integrity or wholeness. I was compliant but not changed or transformed.

Other times I claimed particular values and virtues as the things that would guide my life but then I went out and did the exact opposite of what I claimed to be important to me. Have you ever done that? There was something disconnected between what was going on inside of me and what went on outside of me. It wasn't enough to just say no. I wanted more. I wanted consistency between my inner life and my outer world.

So I've begun to think about Lent and those places of struggle, what we often call the temptations, not so much in terms of self-denial but more in terms of self-knowledge. Maybe those situations offer us important learnings about ourselves.

I think we often hear today's old testament lesson, Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, and today's gospel, Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, and we hold them in opposition to each other.

On the one hand, Adam and Eve got it all wrong, and on the other hand Jesus got it all right. On the one hand, Adam and Eve were bad, and on the other hand Jesus was good. I don't necessarily think that's wrong, it just seems a pretty superficial, literal, and simplified reading of those texts.

I'm not suggesting Jesus got it wrong or that Adam and Eve got it right. I simply want us to find a deeper meaning. I want us to find that deep thread that runs through and connects those two stories, and I think that deep connecting thread is self-knowledge. When you move beyond the dualities of good or bad, right or wrong, what you discover is that both stories are about self-knowledge.

Think about Adam and Eve. They eat the forbidden fruit. Do you remember what happens after they eat? Their eyes are opened. So what does that mean about their eyes before they ate? They were closed. They were seeing with closed eyes, a partial seeing, and complete blindness.

There's something about eating the fruit that opened the eyes of Adam and Eve that gave them a new awareness that awakened them, and brought them to a new level of consciousness. So maybe they didn't fall into sin as much as they fell into consciousness. They experienced something of themselves and the world in the same way as does God. They knew good and evil. They saw it all. Life and their world just got a whole lot more complicated, and potentially more real and more beautiful.

Think about the times in your life when that's happened for you. There's been a new awareness, a new awakening, a new consciousness, and you see the world and yourself in a brand new way. More often than not that seems to follow some sort of stumbling and falling, a failure, a turning away from God, another, or ourselves.

With that new consciousness we might see beauty and goodness but we also see pain and disfigurement. We see the places of wholeness and integrity, and the places of brokenness and disintegration.

And I don't mean that we see that just in the world around us. We see it within ourselves. We see the truth and reality of our lives. We see and understand ourselves to be a mixture of both. We see our contradictions. We are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. We are both. That's why life gets complicated. That's why it's not enough to just say no.

If we look beyond their failure to say no, we can see that the garden experience brought Adam and Eve to self-knowledge. By the same token if we look beyond Jesus saying no, we can see his wilderness experience as having brought him to self-knowledge.

Immediately before Jesus goes to the wilderness he is baptized. While Jesus is standing in the baptismal waters a voice from heaven speaks and says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". Then Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.

He goes to the wilderness having been told that he is God's son. He goes to the wilderness having heard that he is beloved of God. He goes to the wilderness knowing that his Father is pleased with him. And all of that is a given before Jesus ever faces the first temptation.

Whether Jesus said yes or no to the temptations would not determine if he is God's son, if he is beloved of God, or if God is pleased with him. Those are not the consequences or rewards for passing the wilderness temptations but the preconditions of those temptations. Grace always precedes us.

So maybe Jesus' time in the wilderness wasn't so much about proving or giving something to God as much as it was about Jesus learning and experiencing something about himself, that he really is God's son, and that he really is God's beloved, and that God really is pleased with him.

Maybe there was something Jesus needed to learn about himself so that he could come out of the wilderness knowing who he was, knowing to whom he belonged, and knowing his message for the world. The self-knowledge Jesus gained in the wilderness formed and shaped his public ministry of healing, teaching, and preaching.

If the wilderness was a place of self-knowledge for Jesus, might it not also be for us? If the garden and their failure to say no was a place of self-knowledge for Adam and Eve might it not also be for us?

So what if we took these next forty days of Lent and we let go of the questions about good or bad, right or wrong, and whether we are enough, and we sought self-knowledge? I am not talking about self-knowledge in a narrow, selfish, and egotistical way. I am talking about that self-knowledge that is deep and profound, that reveals our truest and most authentic self that makes us face and examine ourselves; not to make judgments or inflict punishment but to seek healing and new life. I'm talking about the self-knowledge that turns our gaze back to God.

If we choose the path of self-knowledge then we'll need to observe ourselves, be watchful, and ask difficult questions. What are the painful and wounded places in me that cause me to act out in ways that are not good for me or others? What are the buttons in me that get so easily pushed, that cause me to react with words or actions that I really do not want to say or do?

What are the ways in which I have contributed to the pain of the world, and how might I now begin contributing to the healing of the world? In what ways have I knowingly or through fear lived a life less than who God knows me to be?

When and where have I fallen short and missed the mark? What are the patterns and habits that direct and control my life? What possesses me? Do I truly believe I am God's beloved son or daughter? If so, how do I live that? If not, why not? In what ways am I living an authentic life and in what ways am I not?

This self-knowledge will take us so much further than will self-denial. This doesn't mean self-denial is not important or that it does not have a positive and necessary role in our lives and in Lent. I just want to give self-knowledge a higher priority and put self-denial in service of self-knowledge.

What are you learning about yourself?" and "What do you need from me?"

What if we let those two questions companion us through Lent? What if we heard those questions being asked of us by God? What if we went through this season of Lent with God asking us, "What are you learning about yourself? And what do you need from me?"

That just might be the start a holy Lent. It would be Lent in which our eyes were opened to the truth about ourselves, who we are, and what we do. It would be a Lent in which, despite things done and left undone, we would rediscover and maybe hear for the first time that we too are God's beloved children with whom he is pleased. Maybe it would be a Lent in which we could let go of judgments and score keeping. Maybe it would be a Lent that would lead us to new life, a fuller life, a life in which we discover that we are God's glory.

Have you ever thought of yourself as the glory of God? Most of us probably don't. Maybe that's because we don't really know ourselves in the way God knows us. Maybe if we did we might see, think, speak, and live differently.

What are you learning about yourself? And what do you need from God? Let's be God's glory. Today, tomorrow, and the day after. Now and forever. Amen