

“To Believe In Yourself”

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Amistad Sunday

Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-12

Matt. 4:1-11

“...God asked.

“Did you eat any fruit from that tree in the middle of the garden?”

“It was the woman you put here with me,” the man said.

“She gave me some of the fruit, and I ate it.”

Gen. 3:11-12

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to avoid temptation by being ourselves.

May we grow into your likeness as true human beings.

Amen

According to Biblical tradition, original sin came about through
the disobedience of two people – a man & a woman;

Though it was the snake that tricked them into eating the forbidden fruit,

it is the woman who gets most of the blame in our Judeo-Christian culture;

and so, the cycle of scapegoating got started and hasn't let up yet...

So, I am more inclined to believe that the more significant ‘original sin’ was:

“She did it!”

However, more and more women throughout the world are finding their voice
and they are speaking up and empowering vulnerable people everywhere
to claim their right to determine their own future.

I had a conversation recently about why I am hopeful for the future

and it is for this reason: women's liberation is changing the world,

a movement that has also come from our Judeo-Christian tradition.

Phyllis Trible is a feminist theologian who grapples directly with even
the most difficult texts in the Bible to find God's message
of advocacy for women – especially in the story of Eve & Adam.

In recent weeks, I have spoken about the works of Walter Wink, who –

like Phyllis Trible, digs into the ancient words of the Bible

to find new and important insights for how God is still speaking

in our challenging times.

Another contemporary theologian whose teachings I have encouraged

you to know about is Rene Girard.

Willard, p.2

Girard's theories about envy and scapegoating
speak to the heart of what the Gospels are about
and hit close to home for most of us, too.

The competition that leads to escalating violence – until a scapegoat is found,
continues to tempt us into its trap of criticizing and condemning.

The only way out is to hear the voice of the victim –
to have empathy for those who unjustly suffer,
and then, pick up the responsibility of our own injustices and change.

We can't honestly be fulfilled ourselves so long as others in our midst
are denied the same rights.

It is tough when criticism and condemnation come from others,
but what happens when we internalize that criticism?

That is why the experience of those who speak up out of their own need
for justice can be so instructive for us all.

Last week, we looked at the story of Christ's Transfiguration in terms of
believing in someone else and the importance of affirmation.

This week, we will look at the Temptation of Christ in terms of believing
in yourself.

“If you are the Son of God...” and so the temptations began.

The word “if” implies doubt before anything else is even said –

“If you are who you say you are...” questions the very right someone has
to self-identify themselves.

Whether it is nations in border disputes like the Ukraine and Russia
or even within families, people constantly strive

to establish who they are in relationship with others,
mark their territory, and assert their sphere of influence.

Everybody needs a name and a place to stand under the Sun;

and when that is denied to a person, they will fight or...

they will begin to believe they are unworthy and wither away inside.

Satan – as the ‘enemy’, serves as the ‘inner critic’

that challenges Jesus’ identity as Son of God by posing scenarios meant
to trick Jesus into self-doubt and manipulation.

According to Girard, the devil is not a personal entity,

but a mechanism of scandal that derives its power like a parasite.

We see this all the time at work in the media, especially in checkout-line tabloids
whose headlines assume the moral authority of righteous outrage
against celebrities who were their darlings just the week before.

Willard, p.3

In Luke's version of the Temptation,

Jesus responds by quoting scripture, "It is written...", "It is written...",
but then he finds his voice and speaks for himself, "It is said..."

In Matthew, the devil tries a third time to tempt Jesus to behave in a manner unworthy of himself by daring to bargain earthly power for allegiance.

Rene Girard equates Satan with the principle of 'scandal' as a 'stumbling block' –
'the violent principle underlying all forms of earthly domination
and all forms of idolatry, who tries to divert toward himself
the adoration that is strictly due to God alone'.

Jesus justifiably drives out Satan the Cosmic Bully, with a word –
"Begone!"

In Native American cultures there is a tradition of the vision quest
in which a young person seeking acceptance as an adult in the community,
must endure a three day fast to receive a vision.

The young person is then given a new name, inspired from the imagery
that arises from the vision.

The metaphor of this for me was an experience I had as a teenager
while on the Indoor Track Team.

All my buddies had been on cross-country in the fall,
so they were used to long distance runs for practice.

The first time I ran more than 10 miles, I fell way behind –
and one of the older runners dropped back to pace me and helped me finish.

The next time, they left me in the dust, but I kept chugging along
until the last 5 miles which began with a long-slow-hill
pounding up that asphalt road deep in the woods.

Everything within me – lungs and legs, wanted to stop running, wanted to quit,
like a voice that said, "You can't do it. Go ahead and walk."

Then, I remembered a quote I had just read in Readers Digest that said,
"Listen, or thy tongue will keep thee deaf – Indian proverb".

Now, I didn't know whether that was Hindu Indian or North American Indian,
but what it meant to me was as if God was saying to me:

"Listen passed your voice – your fears, even your desires, to hear my voice."

Then, perhaps for the first time, I prayed within myself,
"God, help me."

And... I don't remember the rest of the run! I didn't stop. So, I must've made it.

That was the beginning of many long distance runs and many prayers for help.

Willard, p.4

One of the greatest characters in literature is Don Quixote
and the lyrics from the musical, “Man of La Mancha”, speak about
believing in oneself to be bold enough to stand against
the world’s troubles – like Jesus...

*Hear me, heathens and wizards, And serpents of sin!
All your dastardly [deeds are now] past,
For a holy endeavor is now to begin
And virtue shall triumph at last!*

*I am I, Don Quixote, The Lord of la Mancha,
[Destiny] calls and I go,
And the wild winds of fortune [Shall] carry me onward,
[Whithersoever] they blow!*

<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/manoflamanchadonquixote/manoflamanchaidonquixote.htm>

*To dream the impossible dream; To fight the unbeatable foe;
To bear with unbearable sorrow; To run where the brave dare not go;
To right the unrightable wrong; To love pure and chaste from afar;
To try when your arms are too weary; To reach the unreachable star.*

*This is my quest, to follow that star;
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far;. .
To fight for the right, without question or pause;
To be willing to march into Hell, for a Heavenly cause.*

*And I know if I'll only be true, to this glorious quest,
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm, when I'm laid to my rest.
And the world will be better for this:
That [someone] scorned and covered with scars,
Still strove, with [their] last ounce of courage,
To reach... the unreachable star!*

<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/bestofbroadway-americanmusical/theimpossibledream.htm>

‘...scorned and covered with scars’ – who does that sound like?

We learned of Walter Wink’s concept of God as HUMAN – divinely human, and
of us as imperfect people who need to become more ‘human’ – like Christ.
Each of us has the potential to be Christ-like – which is to say,
we can become responsible human beings who carry our own crosses,
to be true to ourselves, to be the people we were created to be.

Amen

*Our lesson today is from Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-12
which tells about the temptation of Adam & Eve and
how the 'blame game' got started...*

2:15 The Lord God put the man in the Garden of Eden to take care of it
and to look after it.

[16] But the Lord told him,

“You may eat fruit from any tree in the garden, [17] except
the one that has the power to let you know the difference
between right and wrong.

If you eat any fruit from that tree, you will die before the day is over!”

[3:1] The snake was sneakier than any of the other wild animals
that the Lord God had made. One day it came to the woman and asked,
“Did God tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?”

[2]The woman answered,

“God said we could eat fruit from any tree in the garden, [3] except
the one in the middle.

He told us not to eat fruit from that tree or even to touch it.
If we do, we will die.”

[4] “No, you won’t!” the snake replied.

[5] “God understands what will happen on the day
you eat fruit from that tree.

You will see what you have done, and you will know the difference
between right and wrong, just as God does.”

[6] The woman stared at the fruit. It looked beautiful and tasty.

She wanted the wisdom that it would give her, and she ate some of the fruit.
Her husband was there with her, so she gave some to him,
and he ate it too.

[7] Right away they saw what they had done, and they realized they were naked.

Then they sewed fig leaves together to make something to cover themselves.

[8] Late in the afternoon a breeze began to blow,

and the man and woman heard the Lord God walking in the garden.

They were frightened and hid behind some trees.

[9] The Lord called out to the man and asked,

“Where are you?”

[10] The man answered,

“I was naked, and when I heard you walking through the garden,
I was frightened and hid!”

[11] “How did you know you were naked?” God asked.

“Did you eat any fruit from that tree in the middle of the garden?”

[12] “It was the woman you put here with me,” the man said.

“She gave me some of the fruit, and I ate it.”

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 4:1-11

- [1] Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil.
- [2] And he fasted forty days and forty nights,
and afterward he was hungry.
- [3] And the tempter came and said to him,
"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."
- [4] But he answered,
"It is written, `Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"
- [5] Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple,
[6] and said to him,
"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,
`He will give his angels charge of you,'
and
`On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"
- [7] Jesus said to him,
"Again it is written, `You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"
- [8] Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain,
and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them;
[9] and he said to him,
"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."
- [10] Then Jesus said to him,
"Begone, Satan! for it is written,
`You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"
- [11] Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.