

WGUMC February 14, 2016 "To Resist is to Exist"  
Luke 4:1-13

"Lips that touch liquor will never touch mine." I'm pretty sure that my Grandmother Irelan used to say that. Back in small town Nebraska, she ran the Methodist Church and belonged to the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Sometimes we forget that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was an epidemic of social problems caused by alcohol: public drunkenness, unemployment, child abandonment and domestic violence. The only solution seemed to be to remove the temptation altogether.

We know how well that worked out. The problem with removing temptations entirely is that we don't learn anything about the world or about ourselves without touching, without testing. In fact, the word "temptation," comes from the Latin verb, *temptare*, which means to touch, to try, to feel experimentally, to test. So temptation is an important part of experiential learning.

In our Gospel reading this morning, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness not to avoid temptation, but to meet it head on, so that he could learn to resist it and to conquer it. There were things at the very start of his ministry that he had to learn to say "no" to. So he went into the wilderness because he had to say "no" to the devil before he could fully say "yes" to God.

There was no other way for him to learn but by testing. In fact, that's how we all learn. A toddler's first lessons come by testing the limits. We tell her, "Don't touch that stove. It's hot." But it isn't hot to her because she's not touching it yet. If you think about it, she doesn't even know what hot is until she touches it, which of course, she does. And then she comes up against one of life's limits. She experiences pain and, whether she wants to or not, she snatches her hand away. Her parent is there to reinforce the lesson and she learns the deeper meaning of the word "no."

"No" is a limit word and we are hard-wired to push against limits. But soon we learn that we can use the same word to establish our own limits. What is the first word that toddlers typically say after "momma" and "dada"? "No!" And that precocious little word marks the beginning of a lifelong process of finding and establishing our limits and becoming our own person.

For Jesus to be his own person—in other words, for Jesus to be the Son of God—he had to do the same. He went into the wilderness to learn to say "no!"

As you know from the story, Satan gave Jesus three tests. The first test was about Jesus turning a stone into bread. The second test would have Jesus gain all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshiping the devil. The third test was for Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple to prove that he was the Son of God. Those three tests represent three different temptations for all of us: the temptation to *do*,

the temptation to *have*, and the temptation to *be*. All of them are temptations to create a false self. We'll take them one at a time.

First, the devil wants Jesus to turn a stone into bread. On one level, Jesus, who is famished after forty days of fasting, is tempted to feed himself. But the far greater temptation is to feed and care for others. If he turns stones into bread, no one has to go hungry. If we had that power, we would turn Half Dome into one giant loaf of bread to feed the world.

Yet Jesus resists the devil's attempt to get him to define himself by what he can do. And that is really hard for us to do, because we are programmed to define ourselves by what we do. Working-age men are notorious for this. Retirement often comes as a huge loss of identity for them. Sometimes, men plunge into volunteer work or hobbies or travel, because they have to do in order to be. And if they don't, too often they just plunge into depression. Their mental and physical health

begins to deteriorate, because if they don't do, they don't know how to be.

But it isn't just men that define themselves by doing. Women, too. I went to see Dorothy Mauseth last week and she said, how sorry she is that she can't work at the church like she used to. Ruby, in her last months, said much the same thing. It's a common refrain. Every servant in the church, every worker who loves their work, faces the same temptation. Pastors, too. I love what I do and I love what is happening around here, and I want to do it all, because so much of my identity is wrapped up in doing ministry.

Yet Jesus was not the Son of God because he could turn a stone into bread. And in God's eyes, we are not what we do, so let Jesus' words be a wake-up call. Jesus said "no" to equating who he was with what he could do. Consequently, he didn't feed every hungry person. He didn't cure every disease. And we think nothing less of him nor love him any less for not doing

everything. We need to remember this the next time we think we're not loved because we aren't doing enough. Are any of us better than Jesus?

On to the next test. This time, the devil wants to give him authority over all the kingdoms of the world, if only Jesus will worship him. The devil is now tempting Jesus to define himself by what he could have, what all kings and emperors want: power. Now you could say that Jesus was going to get it anyway, but the devil is offering Jesus all the power without having to pay any price, without having to suffer any pain. There's just one catch. If Jesus wins this Lordship lottery, he will lose his soul.

How often have we lost our soul in pursuit of some thing we had to have, whether it be power or money or people or possessions. We will even sell our soul for cheap: for food or drugs or sex. The pursuit swallows us up and what we have becomes who we are. That can be the only explanation for a

candidate who lists as one of his top qualifications for office how much money he has made. I wonder how such a candidate understands the concept of public service. I wonder what he would call the one who said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." O where is Abraham Lincoln when we need him?

The man who will wash his disciples' feet turns down the devil because he doesn't want what the devil has to give. He knows the truth, the truth that he tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world" [John 18:36]] and none of the world's kingdoms can compare to it. Jesus is not defined by anything he could have in this world, and neither are we. Our worth comes from someplace else, from the one who says, "You are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you." [Isaiah 43:4]

So if Jesus can't be defined by doing something or having something, isn't he defined by being something? The devil tempts him a third time, this time to prove that he is the Son

of God by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple. The angels, of course, won't let him dash his foot against a stone, so when he survives the fall he will be recognized as Lord of all.

We all want to be somebody. If we can't be loved for what we do or what we have, we still want to be loved for who we are. And our need for love is so great we can easily end up being someone we are not. What does being the Son of God have to do with daredevil stunts anyway? If Jesus had needed to prove that he was the Son of God by jumping off a building, he wouldn't be the Son of God.

We want to be something and social media is an amazing way to be anything you want to be. Celebrities use social media to create their public personas. Everyone knows these are false. But by picking and choosing what to put out there about ourselves, we also create something of a false self. The danger here is that if we haven't done the work to find our true self, we don't even know that it is false.



Basil Pennington talks about these three temptations—to do, to have and to be—and how they are all about creating a false self.<sup>1</sup> He says that if we don't learn to resist them, we will never find our true self. After forty days of learning to resist temptation, Jesus tells the devil, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" anymore. In other words, Jesus doesn't need it anymore. He now knows who he is because the devil helped him to see who he is not. Ironically, the devil made it possible for him to say "no" to the false self and now he was ready to be the one he was born to be.

As is often the case in the Bible, the devil in this story is acting as an agent of God, doing the dirty work of preparing Jesus for the hard road ahead. Times of testing can do the same for us and like him we have to be willing to be led into the wilderness to die to our false selves in order to find our true selves. If you find yourself in a wilderness, consider that

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<sup>1</sup> Basil M. Pennington, O.C.S.O., "The Formation of the False Self and Coming into the True Self," in *Contemplation in Action*, by Richard Rohr and Friends (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 88-90.

this might be what is asking you to do. After all, that's what Jesus meant when he said that those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for his sake will find it. [Matthew 16:25] It is the false self that we must lose in order to find our true self.

Finding the true self is what we are going to focus on this season of Lent. Each Sunday we will consider what we have to learn to resist, give up, or get rid of so that we can peel away the layers of our false self and reveal our true selves to God. Today we ask God to help us peel away what we think we have to do, what we desperately want to have, and what we try so hard to be so that we can be the precious child of God we were created to be.

Since there is no way to avoid these temptations, we must learn to resist them. And as we learn to resist, we will learn to exist, deep in the heart of God.