

Living Eccentrically

Michael Jenkins

Text: Luke 4:1-13

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Before we hear the Gospel lesson this morning, there's a quote I'd like to read you, and ask you to hold in mind. It's from a book written by Michael Lindvall, Senior Pastor Emeritus of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, an old friend who has preached in the St. Charles Avenue pulpit. This may be one of the most profound quotes I've ever come across to describe the spiritual work in which we are engaged during this season of Lent, and it is particularly relevant to our Gospel reading today. Here's what Mike says:

The fact is that if we occupy the center, God cannot. The cross is 'death to self' and is absolutely necessary if God is to occupy the nexus of our orientation. Everything in us that demands to be the center must die. And when it dies can we live in a new orientation toward God at the center." (The Christian Life: A Geography of God, Geneva Press: 2001, pg. 26)

With these words in mind, let us hear the Word of God through:

The Gospel According to St. Luke 4:1-13

The Word of God.

Thanks be to God.

Human history catalogues a variety of eccentrics:

There's the profoundly odd Victorian gentleman, John Elwes, the real-life inspiration for Charles Dickens immortal skinflint Ebenezer Scrooge who, though he worth more than a billion dollars at death, would wear the same suit of clothes day and night, awake or asleep, until they literally fell apart on him. Only then would he buy another suit of clothes and repeat the procedure.

There have been lots of eccentric English Lords, one of whom, John "Mad Jack" Mytton, who allowed his favorite horse to wander freely about his manor house and to curl up at night beside the fireplace while the aristocrat had his port. He so loved his 2,000 hunting dogs that he fed them on steak and champagne.

Then there was Leslie an eccentric I knew who was as far from an English Lord as you can get, who strolled the sidewalks of downtown Austin, Texas like a king. In this case, a really skinny king with a shaggy unkempt beard, clad only in (how shall I say this in order to keep our PG rating???) lady's undergarments, fishnet hose and precipitously tall high heels. On special occasions, Leslie sported a kind of Las Vegas style headdress of feathers and would wrap himself in a yellow feather boa as a prince might wrap himself in a mantle. Austin is one of the few places one might expect someone like Leslie to run for mayor and make a decent showing at the polls. New Orleans, we must admit, is another such city.

These eccentric characters bear living testimony to the existence in English of the irregular noun: I am unique; you are eccentric; he or she is nuts.

When the great Reformed theologian Karl Barth, however, in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, observed that we Christians "exist eccentrically," such eccentric characters were not what Barth had in mind at all. We are, according to Barth, called by Jesus to live eccentrically. But Barth wasn't

thinking of Christians being peculiar or cold or unconventional in the conventional sense of the word “eccentric.” He was using the word in a more technical sense to say that we do not locate our “center” inside of our-selves, that we do not live for the sake of our own interests, that we do not belong to our-selves.

As the Heidelberg Catechism says so beautifully: “We belong body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves, but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.” Barth and the catechism are both trying to express a mystery at the very heart of our identity as persons, something that has the potential to liberate us from selfishness and self-centeredness, and defensiveness, from all the ‘isms’ of the present age that try so hard us captive, even from all the battles over “identity politics” that rage around us, so that we can be more open to others, more open to life, more open to growth, more open to God.

Our identity, as Dr. Seuss might say, ‘our Who-ness’ is defined by belonging, not to ourselves, but to God.

Our Gospel reading today is so familiar. We hear the story every year at the beginning of Lent:

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

The story is so familiar that the strangeness of it doesn’t really strike us anymore. “Oh yes,” we think, “We know that old story.”

And, in the past, when I’ve preached the text, I’ve divided up the temptations just like all my commentaries tell me to do:

- In the first temptation, Jesus resists living for his belly, for his appetites, which might include every temptation of self-interest or mere survival or the temptation to exist for the sake of consumption;
- In the second, Jesus resists the temptation to glorify himself and to rule over others by making a deal with the devil, a temptation which could include acting as though “might makes right” or that tries to justify the breaking of an infinite number of eggs to make an omelet;
- And in the third temptation, Jesus resists tempting God by demanding miracles; which goes to the very heart of the religious enterprise itself, reminding us that the life of faith is about sweating through the ordinary much more than demanding the improbable.

You know the sort of thing we preachers preach when we usually approach the temptations of Jesus. And I believe that all of these insights can be found in this text. Today, however, I’m not going to preach about any of these things because I’d like for us to explore the one thing all of these temptations have in common: the temptation for Jesus to forget who he is.

The great George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, once told a story from his experience as an officer in the First World War. To give the soldiers a break from time to time, they would stage boxing matches. Crowds of soldiers would gather around a makeshift boxing ring. I imagine a certain amount of wagering went. It provided a nice distraction from the battles in which these men fought. At one particular match, at the break between each round, a couple of medics would lead a wounded soldier around the ring, requesting that if anyone recognized him, to please speak up. The soldier had been gravely injured at the front, an injury that had caused amnesia. He no longer knew his name and he had nothing on him to identify him when was found on the battlefield. After each round,

the medics would parade the poor man around the ring, asking time after time after time for someone to speak up if recognized the man. Finally, after so many trips around the, as the fight neared its end, the man stopped and shouted desperately to the crowd, "Will no one tell me who I am?"

When I hear that story I think of the young Jesus, full of God's Spirit, fresh from the waters of the Jordan river, fresh from that extraordinary moment when God spoke from the heavens to tell Jesus and everyone listening: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," those words from Psalm 2, familiar to every pious Jew. I think of this young man, then in the wilderness, burning with zeal for the reign of God, but also hungry and thirsty under a wretched desert sun.

Fred Craddock once said of this moment in the life of Jesus, "Give the tempter his due: the timing is perfect. Jesus has not preached a sermon, cast out a demon, or healed a sick person. He is alone and hungry in the desert, poised at the edge of his ministry."

Maybe all alone in the desert, he has begun to wonder if that voice from on high had been a hallucination: the familiar verse from the Psalms merely a mental echo of a childhood lesson. No doubt the lack of food and water and the heat could make you feel pretty desperate, pretty alone and miserable, and maybe pretty close to insane. It would be no surprise at all if Jesus had begun to wonder who he was and whose he was.

And, of course, the thing about the temptations is that each one plays on just such doubts. Each temptation addresses the question of self. Each temptation tempts Jesus to put him-self at the center, to put him-self first. And this, this, is the fact onto which I want us to fasten our attention this morning, because it is crucial for whatever we hope to accomplish during this period Lent.

I think of Lent as a yearly rehearsal for life itself. Each year we dress up in our best Lenten costumes, something appropriately "sack-cloth and ashy," put on sturdy Lenten walking shoes and prepare to pantomime the journey into Lenten lands. We do this because we believe that Lent somehow prepares us to live more like followers of Jesus. But does it do this?

I believe the key lies in this one thing all the temptations have in common: In the temptations Jesus was tempted to forget who he was, God's beloved child in whom God was already well-pleased because of who he was even before he accomplished a single act, before he performed a single healing in his ministry. He belonged to God. He already existed eccentrically just by being who was. God was in the center, not him.

I'm not sure there's anything more important to learn in the Christian life. There's certainly nothing more revolutionary for our own lives than to learn to live eccentrically. But, you know as well as I do that when we begin to talk about "dying to self" or about "abandoning our false self," or living a "Christ-centered" or "God-centered" or even a spiritual life, we can get awfully abstract awfully fast, leaving most of us standing on the ground scratching our heads and saying, "Well, this spiritual thing sounds pretty important, but I'll just leave it to the mystics and saints."

Is there something here that has meaning for us? As we live in the regular relationships of our lives and as we try to live with that most demanding and problematic room-mate in world – ourselves? What does it mean to live with God as Center rather than us? What does it mean to be eccentric?

It means first that we are liberated to be finite and foolish rather than all-competent and all-controlling. It means we are liberated from the burden of being God. We can give up all those “omnis” for Lent. You know what I mean? We don’t have to be ‘all-knowing,” “all-present,” “all-powerful.”

It means we are not beholden to the powers of evil to provide us with what we want, because we’ve had our “wanters” fixed. Which also mean we don’t have to maintain control over “what’s ours” or even “how thing turn out” because we know that all we are and have and all our outcomes belong to God.

So it also means we can relax (really!) and let go of our typical reactions, our compulsions, or our desire to manipulate others or to compel them to see us as we want them to see us. We can pause longer after offensive thing had been done or said to us, and we can reflect more deeply at a center that is not ours to defend.

If all of this sounds strangely practical, there’s a reason.

You’re going to hear me say this a hundred times or more while I’m with you, but I’ll say it the first time today: God did not go to all the trouble meeting us in Jesus of Nazareth just to make us religious. God plays for much high stakes than that.

God did what God did in Jesus to make us human, human as God first imagined us to be, so human, in fact, that we come to resemble that human to whom God said, “You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.”

Because, that, my friends, is God’s message to us all. Stuck in the middle of whatever wilderness we find ourselves, tempted to imagine that we belong to ourselves or to some devil or the other, this is God’s message to us today: “YOU are my beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased.”

Let us pray: “O Lord Jesus Christ... save us from the error of wishing to admire you instead of being willing ... to resemble you. Amen. (Søren Kierkegaard)