

Blessed be God who animates our lives and offers us the gift of Truth and Life which are found in genuine Humility. AMEN

The desert fathers and mothers escaped to the wilderness of the desert to live lives of ascetic devotion to God which they thought unachievable amidst the Roman and Pharaic powers which threatened Christian life and values. Abba Anthony, one of the desert fathers, said: I saw the snares that the enemy spread out over the world and I said groaning What can get through from such snares? Then I hear a voice saying to me...Humility.

Humility, humus, earth, dirt, the dust we are meant to remember, the dust to which we return. Humility has been defined variously and included as one of the pillars of joy. Humility is a way of life or rule of life. It is the living out of the conviction that all human beings, every man woman and child, are beloved creatures of God, a way of loving without needing attention for doing so or awards or accolades. (See Weavings XV:3) It is praying and giving alms and fasting in secret...

It is considered the virtue which is essential to achieving an authentic Christian life and essential to nurturing the fruits of the Holy Spirit such as kindness, patience, compassion and gentleness.

Our Gospel on this first Sunday in Lent, in fact the entire lectionary, is at its heart intended to not only call us to a holy lent and the rules of life which support this spiritual journey in the wilderness, but also to crystalize that virtue which is the essence of this pilgrimage, the essence of a Christian life. Humility. It is meant to stabilize us for this wilderness journey in the ability to resist temptation and receive grace upon grace.

Humility grounds (no pun intended) our Baptismal covenant. Humility is that which creates the ego emptiness to receive grace upon grace. Humility is the counter virtue to hubris, envy and ego which court the devil.

Jesus encounters the devil in the wilderness and in holy divine fashion meets each of three temptations with humble selfless and righteous responses. holy humility simply does not even engage temptation. And this holy humility which Christ models is what we are also meant to demonstrate.

I am not sure I believe in a "devil" per se but I certainly believe there are evil energies/powers at work in the universe which God is in the process of overcoming and we are commissioned to assist in that work. I essentially believe that the devil, like sin, is a turning from God, a counter conversion if you will, which we often personify as we do so many forces in life and in so doing give it some kind of anti god power, idolatry comes to mind.

One of the masters at the instructive use of this personification of evil is the theologian CS Lewis. His Screwtape letters are imaginative correspondence between a senior devil Screwtape and his nephew and junior devil Wormwood. The uncle is instructing the

nephew in the satanic art of corrupting a human being. Everything in this satanic world is the inverse of the sacred lessons of Scripture. It is the psychology of temptation as opposed to the theology of humble obedience.

In fact, if the threat to eternal and full life as we know it in the Gospels is hate and selfish power, the threat in the underworld is love and selflessness. Humility is the ability to see ourselves as God sees us, the God who knew us in the womb, the God who loved us into being...

As Screwtape instructs Wormwood to beware his job is impossible if the human subject ever comes to make the distinction and consciously directs his prayers not to what the devil tempts but to what he knows himself to be...the beloved child of God. The knowledge and embrace of our true identity causes desperation for the devil.

I have been struck by how Lewis' creativity told from the other side actually crystalizes the Christian life. The ultimate threat to the false self puffed up and manipulative and self serving is the humility which seems like self abasement but is not. Humility is that which polishes the gem which underlies each life and exposes the beauty of true identity. Humility is the ultimate threat to the devil. Humility is the very essence of the anointed one who simply and directly counters the devil's temptations in the wilderness. Humility in the wilderness is rewarded with nourishment and angels.

And so this morning as we begin our journeys in the wilderness may we realize more deeply our God given baptismal identities to resist earthly temptations and to adopt a Spirit of genuine love and compassion.

This entire sermon is grounded in a Gospel which calls us to be our truest fullest selves...over and against our judgemental false selves. Jesus calls us to Take my yolk upon you and learn from me...for I am gentle and humble of heart.

Gentleness and humility are stronger than shame and anger. But our society often masks this fact. Assigning value, measured in material wealth, to accolades and control, CEOness and hierarchical professional institutions, we lose sight of and touch with humility. We fail to see and embrace the narrative of downward mobility. We avoid the wildernesses of our lives. We might do better to resurrect stories of men and women who give up careers of monetary gain to teach and feed; stories of men and women who stay home with children forsaking for some period of time a career which can appear important and seductive.; stories of men and women who move to the humble margins of society to abide with the poor and oppressed.

In a book examining the life of Saint Benedict's teaching on this subject: humility is defined as truth...the simplest of definitions...its counterforce as pride which is radical falsehood.

In the end the battle of good and evil; christ and satan; is between truth and falsehood. This is the battle of our selves as well. this is the tension in which we reside.

Our true selves are the ones who like Jesus and unlike Screwtape, look to THY WILL NOT MINE BE DONE. Our True Selves are composed of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

which spring from the humble self grounded in God.

Returning to the desert fathers and mothers let us conclude where we began: asserting the key which unlocks the snares of temptation. Let us conclude where we began: with humility.

And let us consider turning the tables on Screwtape once again and joining Jesus in humble hope. Remember that for the devil the greatest threat is a human being feeling forsaken, feeling lost, feeling anxious, who nevertheless still obeys our God and in so doing knows salvation. This is the ultimate prayer of humble access and our Lenten journey is intended to enter that heavenly gate by way of gentle, meek, and humble ways.

It is my hope for all of us this Lent that we discover the joy of humility anew as if for the first time. It is my hope we emerge from this wilderness on Easter morning realizing we have indeed proclaimed thy will not mine be done and in so doing have surrendered our egos at the cross in order to experience the true joy of the resurrection.

Questions for discussion:

What is threatened by Temptation?

What is at stake?