

If We Are the Church

Luke 4:1-13

The early Christian church modeled its life largely on the Jewish synagogue—on the synagogue’s rhythm each year of retelling its story. For the young church, this story was emerging through its developing Christian scripture. The most important festival for Christians was Easter. It was a time when new converts were baptized, after an intensive season of learning. That learning catechism was a forty-day period before Easter (not including Sundays), the season we now call Lent.

The number four is symbolic in the Bible. It stands for creation, the four corners of the earth, and the four ordinal directions: north, south, east, and west. Forty is the symbolic number for a spiritual trial. Israel spent forty years wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land.

The story that illustrates and embodies the Lenten season is today’s story of the time of reflection, learning, and trial Jesus experienced in the wilderness following his baptism by John. He was “full of the Holy Spirit and spent forty days fasting in that wilderness during which time he faced three temptations. The tempter offered three challenges to Jesus’ true identity. “If you are the Son of God,” turn stones into bread. Worship me and all the world will be yours. Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and God’s angels will catch you.

Fr. Richard Rohr offers insight into these three temptations and their meaning.

All would-be Christians must face the same three temptations as Jesus did. These same demons are in all of us. The first temptation of Christ was to turn stones into bread. Sounds good, but this is likely our need to be immediately impressive and effective, successful, relevant, and make things happen right now. It is our natural desire to look good.

The false self tells you what it immediately wants and seldom knows what it really needs. You can be a very popular and successful person when you operate at this level, and you will easily think very well of yourself. That is why Jesus has to face that temptation first, to move us beyond what we *first want* to what we *really need*. In refusing to be immediately relevant, in refusing to respond to people’s immediate requests, Jesus says, Go deeper. What do you really desire? It is not usually what you first think. “It is not by bread alone that we live”

(Radical Grace: Daily Meditations, Fr. Richard Rohr, 294, day 308)

The second temptation, according to Matthew, and the third for Luke

The second temptation of Jesus is another one that all of us must face. Satan takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple, symbolizing the top of the religious world itself, and tells him to play “righteousness games” with God. “Throw yourself off and he’ll catch you”. This second temptation is to think of yourself as saved, superior to others, the moral elite on the side of God and religion, and to quote arguable Scriptures for your own purpose—being against God in the name of God. Actually it is quite common.

As Mother Teresa loved to say, “We were not created to be successful [even spiritually successful!], but to be obedient.” True obedience to God won’t always make us look or feel right (that is why it takes faith!), so be careful before you stand on the pinnacle of any Temple, Scripture, or Sacrament. It is the common temptation of actually loving ourselves under the guise of loving God.

(Radical Grace, p. 295, day 309)

The third human temptation is the need for control, importance, and power. The devil tells Jesus to bow down before the power systems of this world. Jesus refuses to bow down before these little kingdoms—the corporations, the idols of militarism and materialism, race and nationality, and all imperialistic thinking. He knows that the price of such love of power is to “fall at Satan’s feet and worship him!”. That’s a very heavy judgment on all the security systems of this world. They will finally and inevitably demand your full allegiance and interest.

(Radical Grace, p. 295, day 310)

“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time.” (Luke 4:13)

The story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness was punctuated by the devil’s repeated challenge, “If you are the Son of God...” Each time, in response to each challenge, Jesus must claim who he really is by the actions he takes, by the priorities he chooses, and by the values he embodies. This temptation was to be repeated throughout his life—most powerfully again in the Garden of Gethsemane in the face of the cross.

The world around us and our own sense of integrity confront us as well with a similar challenge: “If you are a child of God, if you are really a follower of Jesus, then...” If you are really you, fully yourself, how will you respond to this challenge? Will you choose integrity and wholeness as opposed to what’s popular or convenient or safe?

Author and educator Parker Palmer told the story about a participant in a recent workshop. This person had been a farmer for twenty-five years in northeastern Iowa and served in the Department of Agriculture for the past decade.

On his desk at that moment was a proposal related to the preservation of Midwestern topsoil (which is being depleted at a rapid rate by agribusiness practices that value short-term profits over the well-being of the earth.) His “farmer’s heart” knew how the proposal should be handled, but his political instincts warned him that following his heart would result in serious trouble, not least with his immediate superior.

On the last morning [of the workshop], looking bleary-eyed, [he] told [the group] that it had become clear to him during a sleepless night that he needed to return to his office and follow his farmer’s heart.

“How will you deal with your boss given his opposition to what you intend to do?”

“It won’t be easy, but during this retreat, I’ve remembered something important. I don’t report to my boss. I report to the land.”

Jesus remembered that he reported to his own conscience and to the God he knew at the core of his being. His time in the wilderness opened the space for him to remember. Each of us needs adequate space in our lives to remember to whom we report.

The tempter that is our culture and our own fear challenges us today. “If we are the church, then” what actions will we take in response to such a challenge? How will we be church and report to the One to whom we ultimately answer? Our answer as a body, as a community, will depend largely on how each of us answers the challenge of spiritual integrity for ourselves.

This faith community is here to support you on your journey, but not to walk it for you. This faith community offers worship in small groups and large gatherings like this one: community worship with each of us playing a vital part. This faith community provides guidance and tangible connection to social needs and justice ministries including the work of the *Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity* (More2). This faith community is here for you-- here to provide guidance and space for personal growth and self-discovery, and to practice living in responsible relationship with others.

So, now it's forty days and counting until Easter. Let us each recommit to be on our journey with a sense of integrity. We will face challenges and temptations to take short cuts and settle for less than our best. We will face temptation to be church in an easier way. But let us be reminded to whom we report and let us not settle for less than the wholeness for which we were created.