Sermon for The First Sunday in Lent

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, March 10, 2019


Title: The Good Life

On my first day of Intro to Christian Ethics in seminary, our professor defined a Christian society as one in which it is easy for even bad people to make good choices. He gave the example of an ordinary person walking to a corner store to buy a banana. Her hunger for food is good – God-given, appropriate, wholesome as is her desire to satisfy that hunger. But depending on where that banana came from, she might actually be engaging in morally questionable or even evil systems in what appears an otherwise neutral, even positive, chain of choices. If the banana were grown on a plantation where locals are paid less than a living wage, where the environment is degraded by overuse and harsh chemicals, where the labor and bodies of children are employed and exploited, then purchasing and eating it implicates her in those very practices. There’s also the gasoline used in transporting the banana to consider, and the conditions of the workers in the corner store, and how she earned the 39 cents she’s using to pay for it.

Now if the person in question is a good, thoughtful, ethical person, she will surely prefer an organic, fair trade, non-GMO fruit - and might even opt for an orange since it’s hard to check the “local” box with bananas - but the system around her will impact her ability to make that choice. If no organic, fair trade, non-GMO bananas are to be found, and she’s low on potassium, she might end up buying the questionably sourced yellow treat anyway. On the other hand, let’s imagine a good system with a selfish, wasteful, greedy consumer. He might not care how or where or when the banana came to be, who got paid what and what moral compromises were made. But if the owners of every store around only carry produce produced in ethically sound ways, then he’ll end up making a good choice. And let’s say both the hungry human and the storeowners alike are all a bit shifty, but they live in a country that tightly regulates food production and imports so it’s impossible to find a tainted banana anywhere, then the careless choice ends up being a good one, too.

As I sat in class that day, I had one of those “aha!” moments thinking about how my husband and I dealt with moving from San Francisco, where composting was easy and accessible, to New Haven, where it was weird and very California. But we had gotten used to a good system – a system that made doing the right thing easy thanks to legal and cultural
initiatives - and throwing apple cores and coffee grounds into a plastic bag just felt wrong to us. Eventually I found a small farm on campus where I could dump our organic waste, but that meant carrying around a stinky plastic green bin for much of my time in seminary. In this scenario, I was trying to make a good choice in a “bad” system (which is, of course, an oversimplification), so as an individual this took a lot of effort and was kind of awkward and forced me to spend a lot of time talking and thinking about something I wouldn’t even have said I care that much about when I lived in San Francisco.

My guess is that, from time to time, we’ve all thought about these sorts of webs and the ways in which our lives are caught up in them, but we are easily distracted from such thoughts, until we are jarred into an awakened state of awareness once again. As Christians, we talk about both our individual choices and our collective efforts to make the systems around us better as “ushering in the Kingdom of God.” This is, ultimately, Jesus’ mission, and as the Church – his body in the world here and now – it is ours as well. It is helpful to keep this ultimate goal in mind as we enter the season of Lent – a time when we are invited to investigate and examine our individual and collective choices and habits. Lent is like an annual spiritual check up: a chance to notice the vitality of our hearts; the resilience of our spirit; the quality of our connection to one another, creation, and God. It’s tempting to focus only on the individual implications of this and avoid that questions of collective ethics, but this tends to devolve into a rather superficial discourse – should I give up chocolate or facebook? red wine or swearing? – instead of the much more mature, self-reflective work of real fasting and repentance to which we have been called and for which most of us are actually starving. Jesus’ example in the desert this morning is, as usual, instructive.

Today’s Gospel is set against the backdrop of Jesus’ baptism, where, emerging from the Jordan River, the sky opened and a voice declared, “you are my son, my beloved.” He is then driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit, a cue that what is about to happen, while hard, is also holy and wholesome. It is for Jesus’ health and healing. God has given Jesus this name, this identity, but now he has to figure out what being God’s son, God’s beloved, will mean for his life and his future. Of course, his working this out is also about our lives, our futures, and the future of our world.

In the desert, Jesus fasts – he voluntarily gives up certain comforts, foods, predispositions – as a practice, a discipline, something cleansing and clarifying – at which point he encounters
the accuser. This is the voice that slanders, confuses, distorts, the one that leaves us thinking, “if I don’t tell anyone about this mistake I just made no one will know it was me!” or “surely I can get away with this” or that haunts us with degrading mantras like “you’re not smart / thin / successful / rich / strong / creative / kind enough.” (Pick your poison.) We often think of the three exchanges that follow as temptations, but the Greek word used here is actually testing. Temptation has a sinister quality – like a child told he could sneak a cookie and get away with it and then watched closely to see what he does - but testing has a point, has an aim, has a good. It reveals something about where we are and how far we have to go.

So notice that this personification of darkness – this diabolos, set on confusing and confounding - keeps putting Jesus’ newly revealed identity in a conditional clause, “if you are the Son of God,” like this God’s given gift is somehow in question. And notice that the things Jesus is tempted with are not necessarily bad. He is hungry and the devil offers him bread. Bread is good. Eating is good. Feeding one another, feeding a hungry world, is good. But it is not the ultimate good. (Remember that snacking on a healthy, yummy banana is good, but it can also be bad.) Jesus is ambitious and the devil offers him the kingdoms of the world. Think of the societies Jesus could have built: co-ops of justice and mercy! Communities of compassion and kindness! It could be good, and it would be good … if political power were all that Jesus were called to. But his call is so much greater. He is God’s Son, and to rule temporarily, even in righteousness, the kingdoms of the world, would be to settle for something less. To make himself small. And, finally, he is powerful. Jesus is a healer, an exerciser, a miracle man. Someone who can turn water into wine and walk on waves. So the Devil offers him an opportunity to show off.

And each time the devil makes an offer, Jesus has to make a choice. Some of the options available to him are good but not good enough. Some of the options available to him are clearly unworthy but might still be appealing. Jesus leans heavily on what he knows about God to discern the way forward, quoting the Hebrew Scriptures in each response, recognizing the context and keeping in mind the greatest good, and in this he demonstrates his unswerving faithfulness to being and becoming who God has called him to be.

I don’t think the point of this passage is that Jesus passes these tests. Instead, I think it is that Jesus clarifies something of who he is in and through them. He learns some important things about himself: perhaps that he can tolerate his hunger, that he is not a slave to his appetites, and that he is more than what he consumes. He also learns that his call is not ultimately about him.
but about God. It is not his glory, but God’s glory, that he is seeking. And he realizes ever more fully that the gifts given to him have proper and improper uses, like the gifts of a scientist which could be used to create or destroy, and also capable of being simply squandered. And, importantly, he learns about the world he is in: that it will continue to present him with tests, more opportunities to grow and learn and change, to deepen his convictions and live ever more fully into who he really is.

During Lent, we’re invited to remember that Jesus’ world is our world, and we will also encounter the accuser as we live into who God has called us to be, and we will also face tests. And when that happens, it helps to remember that being tested says nothing negative about us but something important about the world – after all, it is not because Jesus was weak that he faced such trials but because he was strong, and because it is the nature of human life that we do encounter real, hard challenges and have to make real, hard choices, made all the harder because many of the things we are called to turn away from have appeal and might even be good.

Now it’s true that it is just generally hard to sustain our intentionality around our choices, but it is also important to name that sometimes we don’t want to think too much about this because choosing well will cost us something. Some comfort. Some pride. Some position. It might cost us a promotion or a friend (good things). It might cost us membership in an association or a favorite treat (also good). And it might simply cost us the ease of fitting in. After all, what paying attention forces us to notice is that the best choice is often not a popular one. That there is - not always, but often - a gap between what is normal and what is faithful.

A few months ago an article came out in Scientific American titled: “More Recycling Won’t Solve Plastic Pollution” and subtitled, “It’s a lie that wasteful consumers cause the problem and that changing our individual habits can fix it.” It’s a sobering reflection on the socially-acceptable use of single-use plastic, which can take up to 1000 years to break down. The author argues that while recycling is good it is not enough: if we keep using single-use products, recycling won’t save us from the proliferation of these persistent plastics. I was moved by this article for what it says, but it also reminded me of another persistent lie which comes up when we start think about our choices. A lie we definitely encounter in Lent. There is a whole industry out there designed to make us feel badly about ourselves and another to sell us ways to fix ourselves. Lent is not about either of these things. We do not examine our motivations and our souls to fix ourselves or improve ourselves or feel better about ourselves. What the Gospel
reminds us of is not that we are bad but that we are lost. We do not need fixing. We need reorienting. We don’t need to take more on. We need to let go of whatever is getting in the way of our natural, wholesome longing for God – the ultimate, ultimate good. And the good news as we are invited into a holy Lent is that we do not ever do this alone. We are held in the love of and buoyed by the life of Jesus himself. We are held in the supportive embrace of this community. And we are sustained by the very spirit calling us to go deeper.

So maybe this Lent we stop pretending that we don’t know where our bananas or our avocados or our clothes or our plastic come from. Maybe we stop avoiding that ethical conundrum that makes us just a bit queasy at work and ask our boss, our colleagues, our direct reports to have some more honest conversations about what we are doing and why we are doing it. Maybe we fast from shame, from self-criticism, from small-mindedness; from ignoring and pretending and downplaying; and if giving up coffee or cake helps you get there - wonderful. It seems to have worked for Jesus. But if giving yourself more rest, 20 minutes of prayer time a day, joining a community organizing effort, reading a daily meditation, or going to a yoga class helps more, then go for that. Whether you are daunted or inspired by this invitation, may you remember that the backdrop of this season in the wilderness is your baptism, when you, too, were named by God: sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. May you cling to that truth and let it drive your discipline and your delight, your fasting and your feasting, that all may be made one and all may be well. Amen.