

Giving It Up

C Lent 1--Luke 4:1-13

Well, here we are in the season of Lent, a season in which it is traditional to give up something that we enjoy, or that is a habit for us, so we can more fully experience the difference between wants and needs, and meditate on our ultimate dependence on God. So this past Wednesday, I decided to give up complaining and grouchiness. And sweets. Most years I give up sweets. But I was excited about the complaining and grouchiness idea, and I went home and announced it to my family, generously inviting them to help me out by letting me know whenever I slipped up. That was Wednesday night. By Thursday morning I was haranguing one of the kids about practicing their musical instrument, and Nan was like, "Um, honey? You're sounding a *little grouchy*." And that's when it came home to me yet again. Giving up stuff is hard. Even stuff that's fairly negative in life, that you're better off without. It's hard. We're attached to our habits and our desires and our temptations for a reason--we get something out of them.

And I think it's important to keep in mind that this was true for Jesus too, as we read the story of what he gave up during his time of testing in the desert. "If you are the Son of God," the devil keeps saying--and notice how the devil ties his temptations in with Jesus' identity--"If you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread," or "worship me and rule the world," or "cast yourself from the temple and let the angels rescue you." And it's easy, given the gospel's spare style of storytelling, to imagine that Jesus has no problem producing his scriptural comebacks, brushing off the devil's temptations with ease. But I think that we have to take seriously the word temptation. We have to assume

that if, in fact, Jesus is being tempted, then those temptations offer something Jesus desires, and rejecting them is not easy for Jesus to do.

What I find revealing about this story is the nature of the temptations. As my kids' old babysitter likes to say, "The devil is sly, sly, sly," and here the devil is slyly trying to leverage Jesus' concern for humanity by tempting him with a kind of worldly power that could actually do a lot of good. Turn stones into bread...and feed the hungry! Be endowed with political authority over all the nations...and legislate justice into the world! Cause the angels to rescue you...and raise your status and visibility! So when Jesus says no to this, he's saying no to a kind of power that most people who want to do good in the world seek out--whether they be politicians or public servants or businesspeople or political activists. He's saying no to formal authority. He's saying no to being installed at the top of a social hierarchy, despite the immense amount of good he could do there, because the hierarchy itself is so contrary to the nature of the kingdom he wishes to usher in--a kingdom of equality and justice and trust and love and invitation, not of force and power and coercion.

But that "no" is hard to say. That "no" comes at a price because it sets Jesus on a path among the underside of society, ministering to those who have little status and wield little power, offering a new world order whose rejection, finally, brings him to the ultimate, self-giving vulnerability of the cross.

So the temptations of Jesus are temptations to translate his identity as the Son of God into worldly power. They are temptations to swear off the path of non-coercive love on which God has set him and to climb the social ladder of formal respect and authority instead. And in this season of Lent they invite us to consider how we are tempted in this

same way in our own lives. The question for our observance of Lent ought not simply be what should we give up that we enjoy. The question ought to be what should we give up that participates in the hierarchy of worldly power around us. What discipline will lead us down a path that ministers to and connects with and walks among those at the bottom of the social ladder?

Of course, we each need to figure out what this means for our own observance of Lent. But here's what it has clarified for me. Giving up sweets? Take it or leave it. But grouchiness is another matter. Grouchiness is a kind of weapon that I tend to wield because, as a father, I am in a position to do so. I'm grouchy to try to force my kids to do things quickly. I'm grouchy as a shortcut to the results I want to achieve. Sometimes, of course, parents *have* to use their authority, but to use it as a substitute for loving engagement and problem-solving with one's children, "because I said so" or "because I'm the Dad," that is certainly a temptation to sin as our gospel understands it.

So that's my Lenten commitment. No grouchiness. No coercive negativity. Trying to walk a path of love. Ask me how it's going at some point. I'll try to answer without complaining.