

Even now, as a seminary educated, life long practicing Christian, I struggle with the theological mystery of Jesus as being both divine and human. Take today's Gospel, for example, one part of my mind says "of course he resisted temptation, he's God!" This statement, then, let's me off the hook in emulating Jesus because clearly I'm not God! And in such trivial a matter as resisting temptations for sweets, I can go ahead and take a second piece because ... I'm not God! In a more reflective moment, I might realize that I'm rationalizing and that I am not being thoughtful and deliberate as I give in to these impulses.

The mere fact that Jesus is *tempted* is a clear signal that Jesus is human. Further, Luke makes it plain that Jesus is not alone in resisting temptation, the Holy Spirit is with him and Jesus is attuned to what the Holy Spirit is guiding him to do. How does Jesus do this?

Jesus is in the wilderness in the first place because he has just learned at his baptism that he is, in fact, God's son, God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased. This is a great deal to take in and to absorb. So Jesus uses the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting to reflect on this information and to sort out just what kind of son he is to be. During this whole time, Jesus is in conversation and relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is also in conversation with the Devil, who is making his debut appearance in Luke's Gospel. And the Devil, as evil personified, appears benign, friendly and reasonable. I wonder if Jesus immediately recognized the Devil for who he was. Jesus is apparently unaware of the principal of "HALT," for at least I know NOT to make decisions or have significant interactions with anyone when I am hungry, angry, lonely or tired and Jesus fell into at least one, if not more, of these categories.

In any event, this very friendly Devil poses three reasonable questions all prefaced by "If you are the Son of God," or "Since you are the Son of God ... why don't you ...? And he backs up the request with an appropriate quote from the Hebrew Scripture. Missing from the text is how the Devil says this. Did he ask in a taunting tone, like some children do to goad another child into a particular action? Or did he ask with honey in his voice, asking his questions in such a way that he was prompting what looked like an obvious result. If he were more direct, he might have said, "Jesus, you're very hungry. Since you are God's son, why don't you turn these stones into bread and satisfy your hunger? After all, your own Father in heaven did this for the Israelites when they wandered in this very wilderness after their escape from Egypt."

As Jesus has devoted a great deal of time in prayer and in relationship with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is able to see through this argument, even though it was tempting. First of all, while he IS very hungry, he is hungry by his own choice. He doesn't need to turn stones into bread to break his fast. More tempting might have been turning stones into bread to feed *others* who are hungry and who do not choose to be. Yet, if he did so he may have reasoned that feeding the hungry in this manner contributes to a cycle of dependence and does nothing to confront the root causes of their hunger. Perhaps this line of thinking prompted Jesus' response of "Man does not live by bread alone."

Maybe the Devil guessed that this might be why Jesus turns down what he thought was a useful suggestion. So he offers him the opportunity to be ruler of all in exchange for worshipping the devil. Here Jesus has a chance to do great good by changing the system of oppression prevalent in his day. In light of this great good, what harm would it do for a little devil worship? The Holy Spirit enables Jesus to see this as a false choice, that doing even a great good is not worth the risk in serving something less than God alone, and respond with a paraphrase of the First Commandment to worship God alone.

The Devil attempts one last try and whisks Jesus to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Now the Devil is essentially saying, “prove to me that you are God’s son because if you are, he won’t let you get hurt.” Jesus, who has come to terms with and accepted his identity during his time in the wilderness, who has additionally grasped what kind of son or Messiah he is becoming, has nothing to prove. Therefore, he is not going to undertake a foolish risk for the sake of satisfying the Devil’s curiosity or feeding his own ego. The risk that Jesus *does* take, the choice Jesus *does* make, is to live into a relationship with God and to live into God’s will for us, God’s love for us even to the point of dying on a cross.

Looking at the story in this way, we can see that Jesus is indeed fully human and that we can emulate him. We too, can seek a deeper, closer relationship with God. We too, can rely upon God to give us strength we do not possess when we are confronted with temptation. We too, can develop the necessary spiritual disciplines that creates and builds upon our relationship with God. We can pray, we can fast, we can read, learn and inwardly digest Scripture, and we can apply this in our world as we come across evil in whatever shape it comes in. We too can choose a way of being that allows us to be in the world and not of the world.

In our Gospel passage, Jesus repudiates material gain, prestige and power. These things are not evil in and of themselves. I would argue that part of healthy ego development relies upon a degree of material gain, prestige and of power or autonomy. It is when they become ends in and of themselves or when they are objectives for our own gain at the expense of others that they fall into the realm of being “of this world,” of the baser human behaviors, and not of God’s realm.

Evil is insidious because it can appear so benign and our culture is saturated with it. We need look no further than advertising practices or our current “silly season” that precedes a presidential election for abundant examples. Both are replete with distortions and lies, conflating wants with needs and lies or half-truths with truth. Consider beauty products that promise us physical perfection or make us look younger, thinner, fitter, whatever? Not one beauty product will do these things. The truth is, God made us and pronounced us “very good.” We don’t need to improve upon what God has made. Consider food product advertising, particularly so-called healthy foods, proudly bearing the label of endorsement from the American Heart Association or proclaiming only 100 calories. Producers of these products are counting on us to not carefully look at the label to

determine if unhealthy ingredients are present or to see if the 100 calories are empty calories. There is no short cut to being thin, fit and healthy without taking thoughtful, deliberate actions.

Our season of Lent is a time set aside for us to make thoughtful and deliberate actions, to be introspective, to take stock of our lives and our relationships. For this reason, we participated in the Great Litany at the start of our worship today. It is a time for us to take an inventory and see if we are pleased with what we see and whether there is room for improvement. It is a time to really seek out God and get to know God better than we already do. Lent is a season to examine and review whether we are actively pursuing God's kingdom and living kingdom values or are we more firmly rooted in this world and this world's values?

We do all this through a variety of spiritual disciplines, certainly including prayer, corporate worship and reading Scripture and also including some difficult ones, such as fasting or making real sacrifices of time, money or labor. We do none of it alone. We are assured that in seeking God out, we will find God; and the Holy Spirit is present to help us. For this we give thanks. AMEN.

