

March 13, 2011
Lent 1, Year A
Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7
Romans 5:12–19
Matthew 4:1–11

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Michael Jordan, some say the greatest basketball player ever, some say the greatest pitcher ever, made a slew of commercials for Nike. In one of them, he says,

I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career.

I've lost almost 300 games.

26 times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed.

I've failed over and over and over again in my life.

And that is why I succeed.

That's a rare message that you can trust from Madison Avenue. Failure, mistakes, disappointment, not living up to our expectations – they're just normal parts of life. Success comes from being able to handle failure and disappointment; to bounce back so that it doesn't crush you; to try again; to risk again.

How do you treat yourself when you fail? Or make a mistake? Or when things don't go your way? Do you treat yourself as kindly, as generously as you treat family and friends when they goof up? Or when they let you down? Quite often people who are quick to be supportive and understanding of others are not so supportive and understanding of themselves.¹

A lot of times we make our poor fortune about ourselves. We see ourselves as the problem, even when it's not the case. We judge ourselves harshly and berate ourselves. Not surprisingly, if this is our habit, we become more anxious, more depressed. Where's that impulse coming from?

Dr. Kristin Neff of the University of Texas says, "The biggest reason people aren't more self-compassionate is that they are afraid they'll become self-indulgent. They believe that self-criticism is what keeps them in line. Most people have gotten it wrong because our culture says being hard on yourself is the way to be."

A New York Times reporter writing about Dr. Neff's research gave this example:

Imagine your reaction to a child struggling in school or eating too much junk food. Many parents would offer support, like tutoring or

making an effort to find healthful foods the child will enjoy. But when adults find themselves in a similar situation — struggling at work, or overeating and gaining weight — many fall into a cycle of self-criticism and negativity. That leaves them feeling even less motivated to change.

That's important to be mindful of all the time, and it's particularly salient in Lent. I get anxious about Lent. I want to do something more, to work on my spiritual life with a bit more fervor and dedication, but I've got to keep in mind that I typically spend a good deal of effort and attention and care on my spiritual life. I think that a lot of us do. I'm doing something for Lent, being serious about Lent, allowing it to be a time of renewal, but also I don't want to split my spleen on Lent, and I don't want to get all bummed out at myself for not being sufficiently holy. We can be too hard on ourselves, too self-critical and negative, for there to be real transformation, real openness to the Holy Spirit.

One of the devil's temptations, especially in Lent, is for us not to think well enough of ourselves, to think of ourselves as spiritual failures. That's not a temptation we are typically aware of. Lent can be about self-flagellation, guilt, negativity, but that's not Lent at its best and truest expression. Lent is about encounter with God, making a bit more room for him in our lives, opening ourselves to him. Lent is about renewing our identity in Jesus Christ, making a new beginning with him at the center.

Every Lent, we begin with the devil tempting Jesus. I suppose that story it can encourage us in keeping our Lenten devotions. But let's keep things in perspective. If, for example, we're trying to have a meatless Lent, and we cave into temptation and chow down a hamburger, even on Good Friday, that's probably not a sin. It's probably a lapse, a minor failure.

Being disloyal to God has much more to do with not identifying with the poor, with judging others who make choices different than ours, with craving money or attention or influence. So the Temptations are not primarily a message telling us, "Watch out for the devil. Don't succumb to temptation in Lent." It's not primarily a warning story. Instead, we listen to the Temptations at the beginning of Lent to remind us what Jesus is like, what's important to him, what his priorities are, what we're becoming.

Garry Wills is a prolific writer, a remarkable intellectual, who holds forth on a wide variety of topics: politics, culture, art, and religion – a Renaissance man, and a Roman Catholic, but I'm pretty sure he's not one of the Pope's favorites. Five years ago, he wrote a book about Jesus and interpreted the Temptations.²

He notes that Temptations come right after Jesus' baptism and just before the beginning of his ministry. Wills sees this as a period when Jesus is discerning his true vocation, a time of intense inner scrutiny and self-experiment, a type of trial. It sums up the hidden years, Jesus' adolescence and young manhood, a time of spiritual quest, and the devil, Satan, meets him in the wilderness, where we all live, and offers him three possible "career tracks." Jesus rejects each of them. Each test offers Jesus a slight, but fatal, distortion of his real mission and identity.

First, an economic temptation: Jesus refuses to turn the stone into bread. Jesus tells us to feed the poor. He miraculously feeds 5000 people. He tells us that failing to feed the hungry is like starving him. Stone to bread - this would feed the hungry. Some today say this is what they're about - providing for all. The political left sees Christian socialism as means to feed the poor. The political right points to the Invisible Hand, the market, as being the means to feed the poor. But Jesus did not come to improve our politics or to give us a new ideology.

For Jesus, religion is not primarily about assuaging earthly hunger. Remember Marx saying that religion is the opiate of the people. He said that because he thought it drugs people with heavenly hopes so they avoid the here and now. "There is another way that religion can become an opiate - by satisfying earthly needs, making heavenly aspirations unnecessary." Jesus recognizes that if this were a dream world, if social reform could create a Utopia, an ideal society, then we would be narrower, less likely to look beyond ourselves. Some physical, material deprivation helps us to look beyond ourselves. It reminds us that we're not only physical beings. We're spiritual beings. "Man shall not live by bread alone."

Second, a religious temptation: Jesus refuses to test God. The devil knows that Jesus' highest priority is his relationship with his Father. The devil tempts Jesus to mess with that relationship. But Jesus rejects presuming upon his Father. In today's Old Testament reading, Eve tested God. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, to make it on their own, to have their own power. Adam and Eve separated themselves from God by seeking what's not theirs. Jesus identifies too closely with his Father to test him. Putting God to the test would be like putting himself to the test.

Third, a political temptation: Jesus rejects the power and glory of the world. The devil is offering Jesus dominion over all earthly realms, including the human spirit. Jesus does not want to rule the kingdoms of the world. He wants to rule in our hearts, but only if we so choose. Jesus most severely criticized the disciples when they sought authority over others, when they wanted to be in control of other people. "Let the greatest of you be a servant to the others."

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Mt 23:11–12)

In the second temptation Jesus is respectful of his Father and their relationship. In the third temptation he is respectful of us and our relationship. He’s not going to coerce or limit our freedom. He respects our dignity. Each of us chooses who rules in our hearts: Jesus or something of this world. Our choice. Not his. He doesn’t infantilize us. He nurtures us by requiring us to decide what we follow, who guides us.

Now here’s what’s most disturbing to me. In a way, the three temptations are really one. The devil tempts Jesus to be what we want him to be. We want God to be: 1) a magician who turns stones into bread, who comforts us, provides for us; 2) a show off who proves God to us, who erases doubt and makes trust, real faith unnecessary, and someone who makes a spectacle and entertains us; and, 3) a king who only seeks worldly success and acclaim, someone we can be dependent upon... and then criticize if things aren’t exactly as we like. Jesus rejects what we want the Messiah to be.

The Temptations show us Jesus discovering what his Father wants from him. It’s part of his spiritual formation, a time of inner struggle and learning and growth, a time of spiritual as well as physical distress. Then God sends his angels to minister to his needs, to feed him.

Perhaps we can recognize ourselves like Israel and Jesus as journeying in the wilderness, seeking formation and growth, moving toward the Promised Land. God invites us to these forty days to identify more deeply with Christ. And as the angels fed Jesus after his ordeal, as God fed Israel with manna, bread from heaven, so he nourishes us in the journey, right now.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Tara Parke-Pope, "Go Easy on Yourself, a New Wave of Research Urges," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2011.

² Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant*, Viking (2006), pp. 11-18.