



Lent 3
March 14, 2004

Matthew 4:1-4
The Temptation to Be Full
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Two weeks ago in our worship service we followed Jesus into the baptismal waters where he identified with you and me. God became so excited by having found us in Christ that he rolled back the heavens and said, "This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Since this voice isn't heard until the moment Jesus identifies with us, it means God is also calling you his beloved, in whom he is well pleased.

In today's text we are told that after this baptism Jesus is led by the Spirit further into the wilderness where he fasts forty days and nights. At the end of that time he is famished. It is then that the devil comes to him and says, "If you are the Son of God [If you are the Beloved, in whom God is so pleased] why don't you turn these stones into bread?" This is the first of three great temptations that we will be examining over the next three weeks. They illustrate the great temptations Jesus faced throughout his ministry, and the great temptations common to the humanity with which Jesus is now identified. The first of these temptations is perhaps the most basic - the temptation to be full.

At first we have to wonder what's the big deal with turning stones into bread? Jesus was really hungry. Certainly there is nothing inherently wrong with eating. And later Jesus would feed thousands of hungry people. So why does this event even rank as a temptation? Perhaps the temptation has nothing to do with eating. The temptation was not to be hungry.

We are created as a hungry people. Every morning the first thing we confront is appetite. And we hunger not only for food, but also for relationships and love, for security and power, for health and for our dreams to come true. But it does not matter how much we consume, we are never full for long. Our insatiable hunger confronts with a choice - a choice that we are created to make day after day. Will you believe in your appetite or the faithfulness of God?

Throughout the gospels, every time Jesus healed or exorcized demons, or fed people, the purpose of those miracles was never to satisfy our appetites for food and good health. The purpose of the miracles was to draw our attention to the love of God. As Jesus told the devil, we live not by bread alone but by the word that comes from the mouth of God. And the word from God that was just spoken is that you are the beloved. But what God wants more than anything is your love as well

Imagine if you were never hungry, but always received everything you asked for from God. Would that make you love him? Of course not. It would only mean that God is your servant. You can only love God as a choice made in spite of his refusal to be reduced to filling your hunger. Do you see? It is your hunger that makes you free to choose.

The temptation of Jesus has been the subject of many biblical commentators and theologians. But no one has explored its depths more wonderfully than Dostoevsky in his great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel Jesus returns to earth to visit the city of Seville in the sixteenth century at the height of the great inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor, an old man with a withered face and sunken eyes, recognizes Jesus and throws him into prison for interrogation. The inquisitor is furious about Jesus response to the three temptations, because he refused to use his power to satisfy appetite. As the Inquisitor charges:

“You came into the world empty handed with nothing but some vague promises of freedom which... men cannot even conceive and which they fear and dread, for there has never been anything more difficult for man and human society to bear than freedom... in the end they will always lay their freedom at our feet and say to us, ‘enslave us, but feed us!’”

Why does God insist on keeping you free even at the cost of not satisfying your hunger? Because only free people can love.

The great hunger you have brought with you into church today - your longing to have a good job, your fervent hope for your children to do well, your daily prayer for loved ones to recover from disease - are all good things to want. Every Sunday we lift these petitions before God in the pastoral prayer, prayers for these things. But even the act of praying is a way of freely choosing to put our lives in the hands of God. We do that because we have learned it is the only way we can keep our freedom.

In his classic book *Escape From Freedom*, Eric Fromm has demonstrated how throughout history people have struggled for freedom but then sacrificed it to slavery and totalitarian governments when the freedom made them anxious. This is just what the Grand Inquisitor was claiming. I don't know that the people of our society are tempted to totalitarianism, but we are certainly enslaved by our appetites.

All too easily we give our freedom away to consuming jobs because we thought the hunger was for success, to consuming relationships because we thought the hunger was for relief from loneliness, and to consuming debt because we thought the next purchase would satisfy the hunger. When we despair of how enslaved we have become, we consume so much food, booze, or busyness that it begins to consume us. We may live in the land of the free, but we know slavery. That's not God's doing. God loves you too much to take your freedom away by filling you up.

When the Hebrews left slavery in Egypt, they began their long journey through the wilderness where they discovered how to maintain their freedom. One of the first lessons they learned along the way, was what to do with their hunger when they were out of food because that is when the temptation to return to slavery was greatest. The only way they could keep their freedom was to trust that God would provide for their needs along the way. Every morning God provided a daily blessing of bread that rained down from heaven called manna. It was fine flaky substance that appeared like the morning dew on the ground. Everyone had to gather their own. You couldn't store it up, so you had to gather it everyday. And it wasn't much - just enough to keep you going on the journey. All of these descriptions are wonderful familiar metaphors for how God cares for his people, daily, individually, along the way in the journey to the Promised Land. No one gets full on manna. We have been full. Now it is time to be free.

The best reason for seeing the manna as spiritual food comes from its name. A literal translation of manna is, “What is it?” So every morning the Moms would go out and gather a bowl full of “What is it?” They would prepare it as creatively as they could and then place it on the table. Their kids would look at it and ask “What is it?” The mothers would just say, “Yes.”

Nothing is more nourishing to the spiritual life than taking in that question - What is it? “Something is missing in my life, God, because I am hungry for more than I have. What is it that I am supposed to do with this hunger?” That question persists throughout the Old Testament all the way into the sixth chapter of John's Gospel in the New Testament. It is then that the question finally gets answered by Jesus Christ who claims to be the manna, the what is it, from heaven. So even the incarnate revelation of God is a “What is it?” That means that the answer to the question is still a question. But a better question. The real question isn't: what is it that you have to consume to be full? The better question is: what is that Jesus Christ is doing for your hunger?

The answer to that question was spoken from heaven on the day Jesus found us in baptism, when the Father in heaven got so excited he ripped back the skies and said, "You are my beloved." Nothing you accomplish at work, no one else that you love, and nothing you buy or consume is going to satisfy this deepest of the soul's hungers to be loved by the Creator who knows you. God really knows you and really loves you. Most of us think we can have this one way or the other. Either people can know us or love us, but we fear that if they really know us they won't love us and if we want them to love us, we have to keep them from getting to really know us. But in Jesus Christ, your Creator who knows you better than you know yourself is claiming that you are beloved.

When you really believe you are loved by God, you are then free to use your life not for consuming but for saying to God "I love you, too." That is why we give to the poor and to the church. It is why we volunteer in the community and care about those in our lives. It is all a way of telling God, "You are my beloved as well."

The truth of the matter is that we already have so much, even though something is still missing. Both the things you have and the thing that is missing are opportunities for freedom. They can either tempt you away from God or become expressions of his love in the world. It is your choice. That forces two questions of stewardship upon us. The first is: What is it that you are going to do about what you have? The second and harder stewardship question is: What is it that you are going to do about what you do not have? Amen.