

Sermon Text: Luke 4:1-13

I have gotten a few comments about my sermon title, “Belly Button Lent.” It will all become clear soon. I hope.

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One of my favorite writers, C. S. Lewis, made some insightful observations about temptation. He said that no man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea, he continues writing, a silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. That is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.

Now, the Hebrew word for good is “tov.” It really means something more like complete or mature. We are good when we are complete, and we are complete when we love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls, and love our neighbor as ourselves as God intended us to be, but we tend toward evil when we judge and cut ourselves off from others and turn inward, feeding only our own desires, our own temptations.

I am assuming that you all know that you are not complete and not good and not perfect. I’m assuming you know that. Because you are not perfect, it must be true that you could be a better son, a better daughter, a better mother, a better father, a better husband, a better wife, in short, a better person. If you agree with all of that, then you also know that you are not a perfectly good and mature Christian, following God’s will at every turn.

Lent is a season of the year, a season of the Gospel, a time to get straight about the reality of our situation, and not only about our need for a Savior, but our each and individual need for growth. We can do better. God’s spirit is the power to help us do better. You could be more faithful to your faith, more true to your faith. Think about those words, more true to your faith, more true. That means some parts of our lives are lies. Some parts of our lives are not faithful and not true to what we say we believe. We lie when we say one thing and do another. I’m assuming that we all agree to these things each built upon another.

Yet, when it comes to temptation, we look with compassionate and rose-colored glasses at ourselves as good people, who try hard and fail sometimes, maybe fail even more than we should, but still we see ourselves as basically good people. That’s the way we see ourselves. Looking deeply at ourselves and judging the world in reference to ourselves is focusing more than a little too much on ourselves. It is indulgent. It is blindingly too self-focused.

In seminary, we used to call this navel gazing. Now, down South that’s belly button gazing. I did not know until my Wesley Commons Bible study group on Thursday told

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, February 25, 2007

me that folks up North don't have belly buttons. That's what they told me. They have navels. Some don't know what the word belly button means. Anyway, navel gazing in this sense is self-referential thinking, glorifying in us, and defining things in terms of us, even sin and God and goodness in terms of us. Usually, it ends with us thinking we are basically good people. It is possible to stare at yourself so deeply that you see nothing clearly, not even yourself. Whole congregations can do it. A congregation is navel gazing if it considers only its members and its concerns and ignores the community around it.

I like the story, which comedian Dick Van Dyke tells, about the little boy who figured out how babies get their belly buttons. The little boy said he had it all figured out. He said, “You see, when God finishes making babies, He lines them up in a row, and then He walks by, and He pokes them and says, “You're done! You're done! You're done!””

Well, contrary to the little boy's theory, at least God is constantly through His Spirit telling me, “You're not done! You are not done! You are not done!” Other people might see you as saintly and righteous and devout, but you are not done yet. God knows that, and I hope you use Lent as a time of self-examination so you'll know just how far you have to grow. In some ways, I am sure you seek God's will and seek to make the love of Christ known. In some ways and parts and times in your life, I am just as sure that you don't consider God's will at all nor the love of Christ. You're not done.

It is grace that God will accept us as we are, and grace that God will grow in us faith, and finally grace that anyone ever enters Heaven. No one arrives as fully good and perfect in this life. Woe to those who think they have arrived in faith on their own.

There are certain central truths, which you can derive from someone's self-image. If one believes that they have attained humility, they have not. If one believes and proclaims, “I have attained wisdom!” They have not. If one believes they are free from temptation and sin, or to make it more personal, if you think you are holy and good, you are not. That comes from taking a too-narrow view of yourself, so narrow that you really cannot see anything at all.

Today's Gospel is about temptation, specifically, Jesus' temptation. The devil said to Jesus – I'm going to sort of paraphrase it to fit us and that Scripture – but the devil said to Jesus more or less, “Forget God's will. Shortcuts are okay for you to meet your physical needs and desires.” Then he said, “Forget God's will. Shortcuts are okay for you to gain power, so go ahead and make a deal with the devil.” Then he said, “Forget God's will. Shortcuts to God's plan for your life are okay for you. Take the easy way out!” “Jesus,” he was saying, “You're special! Forget God's will!” Jesus didn't buy it. Sometimes, we do.

Now, I could truly and Scripturally preach about the temptations of Jesus, and leave us out of it, and that would meet the needs of many to feel good about having come to church and to continue to feel good by not being forced to see any problems inside here,

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, February 25, 2007

but no such luck today. We all have problems inside here in our heart and in our mind and in our will. At every temptation, we are tempted to do what we know to be wrong. At every temptation, we are tempted to say what we know to be self-serving and untrue, to take the easy way out regardless of right or wrong or whom it hurts or costs. All of these temptations faced Jesus. The devil even used Scripture to tempt Him, to short cut out of God’s will for His life. All of these categories face us as well.

Temptation. Didn’t we pray about temptation just a few minutes ago? Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Many have interpreted that from the Lord’s Prayer as saying, Lord; give us strength that we not yield to temptation. Deliver us out of the evil when we begin to yield out of the easy way, the self-centered way, the self-serving way. When the time of trial comes, deliver us – for it will come.

Jesus promised to give us strength by the Holy Spirit to resist the short cuts and the temptations that try us, and Jesus also promised, the way I read it, that temptations and dark valleys will come.

The devil gave up on Jesus during his time of trial. He says until a more opportune time. That time was before the cross when Jesus’ moment of weakness and extreme suffering and fear and feelings of abandonment. We have moments like that, too. Now, we may not speak of those sorts of moments in Sunday school, but it is Lent, and I’m speaking of them, and I know that we have them. With our children, with our spouse, with our health, with our offers too good to be true, and in the dark night of the soul when we wonder if there is a God at all, this is why the apostle warned, “Do not be conformed to this world’s pattern of thinking, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Don’t get bogged down in temptation and doubt. Give yourself to God and grow. Never underestimate the power of temptation. Never overestimate your own strength to resist it. Unless you say no early in the game, you don’t have a chance. Whether it’s doubt or excusing your own inexcusable behavior or breaking the promises you have made, the problem for most of us is that we get as close as we can to the temptation, and we keep running the idea over and over in our minds to see how it might play out, and suddenly, we’ve gone too far, and we’re at the point of no return. Yet, if we’ve lived long enough, we know full well from experience and from pain that temptations are always lies, always lies! They never deliver what they promise! The outcome is never good!

The antidote is to seek God. Seeking God is all in the world that repentance means. Repentance does not mean, “I’m sorry.” Repentance means to take a turn back toward God, to recognize you’ve been walking away from God and to return, and turn back toward God. That’s repentance. Repentance means to choose to cast off all the self-centeredness and pride, to embrace a spirit of humility. It means to replace the desire to use others with the desire to serve others. It means to strip our souls bare so that we see ourselves as we truly are, and to stand in Lent’s uncomfortable desert, self-accused of sin. Thus, spiritually naked and exposed, we become open targets for the salve of God’s grace, the salve and the comfort we need to renew and grow.

“Belly Button Lent”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, February 25, 2007

Navel gazing can convince us that sin is not sin when I do it, that God understands when I do it. I do it for different reasons than other people, and I did not enjoy it when I did it, and I had to do it or worse things would happen or somebody else did it to me so it's right for me to do it back to others. I don't care what anybody says, I've made up my mind, and God will just have to understand. I'm already saved. I don't have to worry about sin anymore.

I've heard all these excuses about deeds done badly. If sin is anything that is contrary to the will of God, then what we need to seek obviously during Lent is the will of God for our lives. Seek it! Pray for the power to live it! You already know it. It's not so hard. Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Treat everyone the way you would want to be treated. Speak to everyone the way you would want to be spoken to. Deal in business in the way in which you would want to be dealt with, and do not judge others unless you want to be judged. There is more to this faith of ours than self-awareness and navel gazing. There's God and others to deal with. Lent is the time to deal. Amen.