

A sermon preached on March 6th, 2022 – the first Sunday in Lent – based upon Luke 4:1-12 entitled, "Facing Our Unsatisfied Desires and Finding the Place in God of Enough".

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The one time in my life when I did a serious extended fast was seventeen years ago during my Sabbatical when I did a four day fast out in the wilderness of Northern California. I had a dream one night. For many years I had a Tuesday morning tradition of gathering with a couple of men from the church at the Empire Diner for breakfast, and in the dream I'm at the diner, and the grumpy waiter we had in those days was taking my order. That was basically it. No great insight other than I was really hungry and my desire for food was showing up in my dream.

I remembered that dream when I read our Gospel lesson about how Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days, leading him to be "famished" – in other words, his desire for food had reached a feverish pitch.

Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice. If you are unfamiliar with fasting and wonder what value there is to choosing to go without food and experiencing the sensation of serious hunger, there are a couple of different reasons people offer for fasting.

Fasting can release toxins from the body that cloud a person's consciousness, thereby clearing the mind to think more clearly. People can fast as an act of solidarity with

people who can't because they have no food. There are a lot of people fasting around the world right now in solidarity with the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

But the reason for fasting that I would like to focus on today is the opportunity it provides to consciously reflect on the experience of desire and how it functions in our lives.

The desire for food that we call hunger is one of the most basic of human desires. But we have other desires that arise naturally throughout the course of our days.

There is the desire, for instance that is loneliness – the desire for companionship.

There is sexual desire, a natural part of our biological design.

There is also the desire for money, or more accurately the desire for the things we hope money can provide us: pleasure, comfort and security.

We all have desires in relation to other people for recognition, appreciation, understanding.

We have the desire to be successful in our labor – the desire to feel effective and capable.

We also have the desire for order and clarity, especially when we find ourselves in the midst of chaos and confusion – which has often been the case lately.

All of these desires are natural – a part of what it means to be a human being – and none of them inherently evil or shameful, though sometimes we may be led to experience them as such. In their proper place, each of these desires can provide motivation for constructive action.

Where we get in trouble is when a particular desire becomes overblown – when it functions as a kind of "god" in our life – so that having it go unsatisfied is experienced as simply intolerable. Which is precisely the mindset the devil tries to induce in Jesus out there in the wilderness in relation to his desire for food. *"You're the son of God, Jesus! You don't have to put up with feeling hungry for food. This is simply intolerable!"*

It is important to point out a distinction here. It is intolerable when people literally are starving to death. But that isn't the case with Jesus. He is undergoing a voluntary fast that he knows will come to an end.

To be a human being means we will routinely have the experience of desires going unsatisfied. If our reaction to this fact is to find it intolerable, we are essentially saying that we can't really say "yes" to the gift that is our life.

The state of having “enough” is never attained.

We become slaves to our desires, becoming for us our gods. Any measure of contentment, gratitude, peace of mind becomes impossible. Life is permanently postponed.

And when particular desires become gods for us, damage is done to life.

It is natural for a person to desire success in life. But when the need to be successful becomes so consuming that it is a person’s primary concern in life, there will be a price to be paid. Imagine, for instance a father who experiences life this way – sacrificing the needs of his children on the altar of his singular focus of being a success in this world. The children will be left wounded by their father’s neglect.

The horrific destruction that Mr. Putin has unleashed upon the world is a result of his consuming desire to be what – respected, admired, feared? It makes you wonder whether Putin’s power grab arises out of a consuming desire to prove to an absent father that he really was worthy of attention after all.

Regardless of whether you believe in a literal devil, it is undeniable that there is a destructive power at work in this world that is constantly trying to enslave us to our desires the way the devil sought to do with Jesus.

Waiting for a Youtube video this past week I found myself obliged to watch a Sports betting app. Evidently my google search history indicated I was a sports fan and a potential customer for gambling online on sporting events. “*They say less is more,*” the ad enthusiastically shouted. “*But we say more is more!*” In other words, how much is enough? There’s *never* enough. There’s always needs to be more. That’s what you call an addiction.

So out there in the wilderness Jesus felt the power of his desire for food. He heard the voice in his head that said, “*This is intolerable. Whatever it takes, you must satisfy this desire. Turn this stone into a loaf of bread.*”

Jesus sat there with that desire, and in the stillness he recognized that the voice was lying. “*This desire is bearable.*” He recognized also that there is a deeper desire beyond all other desires, and that is our desire for God, and that it is in centering oneself in this first desire that all other desires find their proper place.

The other two temptations that the devil presented to Jesus can be seen as variations on the first. “*Jesus, do you desire to be a success in this world? I can make sure you’re a success. I’ll give you authority over the kingdoms of this world.*” Mr. Putin has his heart set on this one.

And finally, the temptation to jump off the top of the Temple in order that the angels might catch him: *"Hey Jesus, you desire security and safety? This vulnerability that comes with being a human being – it's intolerable, right? How about you command the angels to make sure you are never harmed?"*

So, I invite you to spend some time reflecting on your desires. We all have lots of different kinds of desires – desires, which to some extent compete with one another for our attention. Because of the pace with which we live our lives to a large extent we're not really conscious of how our desires are impacting our life.

On some less-than-fully conscious level, the possibility of our desires going unsatisfied can seem simply intolerable -- a perception that blocks us from experiencing life as a gift – of experiencing "enough."

The example of Jesus in the wilderness invites us to undergo something like a fast in which we bring our desires fully to consciousness, allowing ourselves to feel directly their full force – trusting that as we do, something will shift inside us – allowing us to experience more inward freedom.

For instance...

This is what loneliness feels like. I would rather not be lonely, but I recognize as I face directly this longing that I can in fact feel lonely and still experience my life as a blessing. I can relate to others without having my loneliness overwhelm our interactions with them.

Or, this is what feeling misunderstood and unappreciated feels like. I wish that certain key people in my life would show me more understanding, more appreciation – but if I don't receive it, can I be okay? Well, actually, I realize I that I will be okay.

Or, I wish I could receive some assurance from my doctor that I will have my health for a good long time, or that I won't lose my job but if this is not possible, can I embrace the gift of my life, right here, right now? Yes, I can.

It is through this process that we begin to learn the secret of which the Apostle Paul wrote:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.
(Philippians 4:12-13)

The theme of bread is present at the outset of Jesus' ministry as the focus of his desire. The desire for bread expresses all the unfulfilled desires of life. In spite of the pangs of his hunger, out there in the wilderness Jesus comes to the place of "enough."

In a few minutes we will remember the story that comes from end of Jesus' earthly life, and once more bread is present. It is Jesus' last meal before he will die. He gathers together with his friends as the world around him seems to be utterly breaking apart.

Now a small piece of bread represents that which can satisfy the deepest desire of our lives -- the love of God that sustains us. The little piece of bread is enough.