
THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Luke 4:1-13

Dr. Mark Achtemeier

Third Presbyterian Church
Rochester, New York

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Today marks the first Sunday in the Lenten season. The classical spiritual discipline for this season of course is to give up something we enjoy, like red meat or chocolate, as practice in curbing our narrow focus on worldly gifts so that our hearts may rise up to return thanks to the giver. This spiritual discipline tends to get lost in translation sometimes. Back in Dubuque, a heavily Roman-Catholic town, one can tell the Lenten season has arrived by the presence of billboards around town advertising the all-you-can-eat seafood buffets at local restaurants. Such travesties lead some of us to repeat the tired old joke about giving up Lent for Lent this year.

Today the church directs our attention to St. Luke's account of what Jesus gives up for Lent. Every year at this time the lectionary places before us this strange report about Jesus' forty-day struggle with temptation as the Spirit drives him into the wilderness following his baptism.

It isn't necessarily a tale with a happy ending. Jesus makes some very odd and questionable choices in his confrontation with the Tempter.¹

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Think about that for a moment. What would have been the result if Jesus had used his divine power in a consistent way to produce food for himself, yes, but also wherever hungry people needed it? Jesus could have solved the problem of world hunger at a single stroke. If he had been willing to turn stones into bread, countless multitudes of starving children could find relief from their suffering, and the whole world would have come flocking to him, giving honor to one who brings divine power to bear in providing for their most basic human needs. Yet Jesus chooses not to take that road, and his choice gives rise to a history in which future generations will suffer untold want. Why?

The Tempter showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them and said to him, *"All these I will give you if you fall down and worship me."* Our nation is presently in the throes of a presidential campaign, and we are all acutely aware what a hazardous and uncertain business it is trying to pick a national leader who is capable, wise and just.

Think what the world would be like if Jesus himself was the undisputed ruler of every land and nation and people around the globe. Jesus could have used his divine power to establish justice and peace for the whole world. Yet Jesus chooses not to take that road, and his choice ensures that

human history will continue to be a story of conquest, exploitation and injustice as nations, factions and rulers compete for self-centered dominion. Why?

The tempter places Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple, and says "*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.*" Let everyone witness with their own eyes how the angels will bear you up and spare your life! Jesus could have used his divine power to dispel all the obstacles to faith. He could have produced public miracles on demand to convince even the most hardened skeptics.

Think how much blood has been spilled in human history as the result of clashes between rival religions. Jesus could have used his divine power to dispel all doubts and remove all ambiguity from questions of faith. Yet Jesus chooses not to take that road, and his choice gives rise to the horrors of human history steeped in religious conflict. Why?

Victory over hunger and poverty, worldwide justice and peace, religious unity--these are the things Jesus gives up for Lent. These are the landmarks on the road *not* taken as Jesus faces the Tempter in the wilderness. What prize could possibly be worth such a sacrifice? What path does he choose instead?

Jesus actual choice is that other road which leads to Jerusalem where he will be betrayed and abandoned, mocked and rejected, nailed to a cross and left to die. How on earth do we make sense of these choices that Jesus makes in the wilderness? He could have been universally adored, celebrated and glorified. Instead, Christ sets aside his divine power and walks that other road which leads to Jerusalem and a cross of anguish. Why would he do it? What is to be gained by it?

One thing Jesus' choices all have in common: they all set aside the option of his coercing or manipulating us into following him. The precious treasure that Christ gains by making the choices he does is the dignity of our own free choice. Jesus' refuses to present us with a divine offer we can't refuse, and he thereby leave open the possibility that you and I might choose him freely in love. He doesn't coerce our decisions. He won't dispel all possibility of doubt. He preserves our freedom and our judgment intact, which allows us to choose him out of genuine love.

There is a strange logic to these choices. Think about it in terms of a human analogy: Imagine you are a multi-billionaire looking for true love. Everybody knows you are a very wealthy person. All your power and riches attract large crowds of prospective spouses. But no matter how great the "love" they profess for you, you can never be sure if this person's interest is in you or in your money.

Jesus in his divine glory is like that rich person. If Jesus had come with free bread and miracles and political authority, the whole world would have flocked to him out of simple self-interest. We would all celebrate him and cling to him for the sake of the worldly benefits he could provide. Our ultimate attraction would be to the earthly benefits rather than to Jesus himself, and in that the devil would have his final victory.

Pay attention to this, brothers and sisters. God doesn't want puppets. Christ doesn't want to buy your affection. So much does Jesus value your personal dignity and freedom, so much does he want genuine love to be the bond that connects you to him that he gives up all his divine glory, he

lays aside every form of power or coercion or enticement. He sets aside a world history of peace and plenty...all so he can have a truly loving relationship with you. That is how much he loves... you! That is how valuable your love and your freedom and your dignity are to the Lord and King of the whole universe.

Is love really that important? When my father died a few years I started thinking about what life looks like as we look back on it from its end. As our time on this earth draws to a close, what do you suppose will we look back on as valuable? Will you and I think about all the wonderful possessions we had, the gadgets and luxury items, and say to ourselves, "My life was worthwhile because I had all that cool stuff!"? Will we linger over fond memories of our investment accounts, or the power we had, the control we exercised over others, the respect we commanded? Will we spend lots of time rehearsing the politics we espoused or the positions we took on issues of the day?

Don't you think that far more significant than any of these will be the knowledge of how much we have loved, and how deeply? Maybe love really is the most important thing.

Jesus gives up divine glory and a whole world in order to walk that dark road to Cavalry. And he does it for love. He does it so you and I can love him freely, so we can follow him voluntarily in the dignity of our own un-coerced choosing.

Let me pose one further question. When you and I come to realize how valuable our dignity and freedom are to God, when we really start to wrap our head around that, how could we not also come to respect and value the freedom dignity of our neighbors?

The remarkable thing about the freedom that Jesus wins for us is that he leaves us also with the possibility of misusing our freedom. Jesus puts us in a position where we can come to him freely in love, but we do not have to. He sends his Spirit to free our hearts from our little self-enclosed bubbles of ego and selfishness. We can use that freedom to grow in generosity and grace and compassion, but we do not have to. We also have the option to throw away that freedom and go right back to our cold materialism and self-absorption.

There is a simple little teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that always gives me pause. Both Matthew and Luke report how Jesus told his followers, "*Give to everyone who begs from you.*"²

I hear this and immediately launch into a tap-dance of qualifications and "explanations", how Jesus doesn't really mean this literally and we need to consider whether the person is worthy and how our gift will be used. How many poor beggars do we turn away thinking oh, that person will probably just spend the money on booze or drugs.

Jesus mentions none of these qualifications of course. And thinking about this it occurred to me—it may be the case the ninety-nine out of one hundred times that little bit of cash I give the person on the street will be spent on drugs or alcohol. But if I don't put something in that person's hand, he will never have the freedom or the option to do the right thing with it. Is Jesus just telling us to keep on giving that person the opportunity to get it right, no matter how many failures there have been in the past?

Let me ask you something. How often do you go to bed at the end of the day thinking “This is a day where I got everything absolutely right”? Maybe your life is much more together than mine is, but I haven’t ended many days thinking everything in my life was just the way God wanted it to be. We misuse the freedom God gives us, and yet God upholds our dignity as free persons, God gives us the opportunity to get it right, over and over and over again—for all the days of our lives!

Jesus set aside all his divine power and glory, he gave up a whole world, so that you and I would have the freedom and dignity to make a choice for him and for our neighbors in genuine, un-coerced love. This Lenten season provides us opportunity to ourselves grow into Jesus’ pattern of respect and caring for the dignity and freedom of our neighbors, even when they don’t use that freedom entirely wisely.

You and I do not have divine power and glory in our possession—that is doubtless a very good thing! But you and I sometimes face situations where we have an upper hand over on our neighbors. In these situations we have an opportunity to grow into the love of Jesus by using our advantage or setting it aside in a way that respects their dignity. Maybe you will find yourself as part of a social “in” group where you must choose how to relate to others who are not so popular or important. In that situation you can use your influence to either build them up or undermine their status. Perhaps you have an advantage of rank or seniority at work, and you have a choice whether these advantages will build up or trample over the less experienced employees around you. Perhaps you are part of a committee or organization or political group where you have a secure voting majority, and you can decide whether you treat the losing minority with respect, taking time to listen seriously to their concerns, or whether you simply vote them down without a second thought. Maybe you simply have more money and at your disposal than do other people you confront day to day. Will your use of resources reflect selfishness or compassion?

Jesus resists the Tempter and makes the hard choices in the wilderness in the hopes that loving him truly will also rekindle our love for our neighbors whom he cares so much about. Perhaps our spiritual project this Lenten season can be to learn again what it means to walk as Jesus walked, to make the kind of choices he made, and to afford one another the kind of dignity and respect Christ has shown toward us.

Perhaps we can ask God to lead us away from those roads where we undermine our neighbor’s humanity or trample on their dignity through coercion or gossip or power politics. Maybe our relations with others can start to glow with the light of our own recognition that love really is the most important thing. May God make it so!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ This critique of Jesus’ choices is inspired by Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor”, Bk V, ch 5 in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

² Mat 5:42, Luke 6:30