

Sermon on Matthew 4:1-17
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High Street Uniting Church, Frankston
20 January 2019

Note: This reading selection follows the Narrative Lectionary.

This was part of a service which included many elements for the Day of Mourning, being the Sunday before Australia Day, recognising the impact of colonisation on the life of the First Peoples of Australia.

Let us pray.

Loving God,
you have so made us that we cannot live by bread alone,
but by every word that proceeds from your holy mouth.
Cause us now to hunger after your word,
and in that food to find our daily need;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The story of Jesus' temptations
after 40 days in the wilderness
is usually told at the beginning of Lent,
where it comes with a focus on
self-reflection, giving things up,
even self-sacrifice.

This year,
the narrative lectionary has given us the reading
in its proper place.

The order is important.

Last week, from the previous chapter of Matthew
we heard of Jesus' baptism.

In his baptism
Jesus is assured of his identity and that he is loved:
the Spirit descends upon him
and the voice from heaven says:
"This is my Son, the beloved,
with whom I am well pleased".

And that pleasure from God,
that love from God
and that identity from God
all come BEFORE Jesus
has actually really done anything.

The grace and the love of God comes FIRST,
and that is where we begin too!

God loves us, delights in us, and gives us our identity
before we even do anything,
as God calls us into relationship.

THEN, before beginning ministry,
Jesus is led by the Spirit (Matthew's wording) –
led by the Spirit
into some time of solitude,

of reflection, even of fasting,
NOT for the sake of temptation,
but for PREPARATION.

It is entirely good that Jesus takes that time,
and it reflects the preparation
that we ALL need
before we begin ministry –
because we need to be aware of our OWN BAGGAGE
and vulnerabilities
before we try to offer ministry to others,
because otherwise we can easily end up
meeting our own needs through others,
and missing what is really going on for them –
which is easy enough at the best of times.

It is appropriate and good, right at the start of a new year
that we reflect on this.

Henri Nouwen suggests that there are three lies
that we tell ourselves.ⁱ

Among our personalities, we will all be more vulnerable
to one or other of these three lies.

The first is that “I am what I do”.

The second is that “I am what other people think about me”.

The third is “I am what I have”.

All of us are vulnerable to each of these lies to an extent,
but for each of us,
one of those three is probably the most significant.

I wonder if you can pick one that’s most significant for you:

“I am what I do”.

“I am what other people think about me”.

“I am what I have”.

To help you pick:

Those of us who are vulnerable to the lie,
“I am what I do”,
can either be constantly achieving activists
or, contrariwise, be quite avoidant;
can be concerned for doing things right,
or maybe for having control –
or, contrariwise, avoiding control.

Do you know any people who might fit that?

Those of us who are vulnerable to the lie,
“I am what others think about me”
may perhaps try to please others,
to show how helpful they are,
and deeply value people’s affection;

or, if not affection,
then respect,
or acknowledgement and appreciation
and belonging.

Quite relational people, one way or another.

Can you pick anyone like that?

Thirdly, those vulnerable to the lie “I am what I have”
are driven to an extent by fear;
their minds drive a concern for security,
either in possessions, or knowledge,
or always having a safe leader to be loyal to,
though often worrying that leader
is not actually OK;
or always having options to escape to,
ultimately always seeking to have a kind of security.

Do you know any people like that?

Have you picked yourself in one of these?

Now notice this.

The first temptation that Jesus faced was:

Make bread.

If you are the Son of God, do something.

How could you be the Son of God
if you're not doing something?

If you are the Son of God! Are you really there?

What we all have to face,

especially if we are prone to the “I am what I do” lie,
is that it is indeed a lie.

We are not what we do.

Like Jesus,

our identity as loved children of God
comes BEFORE we do anything.

This is God's grace.

Doing things may be great,

but if you find your identity in what you do
you may miss the point
that you *are first* a loved child of God.

Then in the second temptation,

Jesus is taunted:

“If you are the Son of God,
then jump off the top of the temple
and God will send angels to protect you”

People often think that this is a temptation

to be spectacular,
but it's more subtle.

Whereas the first temptation was testing

whether Jesus' identity
was defined by his activity,

the second was testing

whether Jesus' identity
was defined by what others might do for him,
by how God and the angels would respond to him,
what they really think about him.

Jump –

and see if they'll really catch you.

See if they really love you.

The lie is that Jesus should be driven by that

and base his ego on it.

Jesus was beloved by God

with no proof required.

For those of us who are vulnerable

to needing other's approval,

before ministering to others

we need to recognise

that our identity is not bound up

in other's opinions or actions,

but we can rest in the knowledge

that we are beloved of God.

Then, for those concerned for security,

the third temptation is:

"you can have the world!"

What more security could there be than that?

But of course,

the exaggeration exposes the lie.

Having the world

having all possessions or knowledge

or security or possibility

doesn't address your internal life.

The truth that Jesus named is

that all that is needed at the centre

is worshipping God;

which doesn't actually come with security as such.

But if you're able to let go

of those kinds of security

and know your identity and peace in God,

THEN you are at a place

where you can begin to engage in ministry.

Today is a Day of Mourning

for the damage done to Indigenous life and culture,

both deliberately and unthinkingly,

in ways that we hardly even fathom.

For those of us who are not Indigenous,

to be able to face and hear that

we need to know our own baggage first,

if we are to put it aside

to work towards reconciliation –

we need to be aware of our needs of

control or activity,

our needs of approval,

and our needs of security;
and recognise that there is a deeper core in all of us:
because God loves us, all,
as we are,
and invites us to trust and engage with and rest in
that love.

THEN

we can follow God's lead
in ministry and reconciliation and justice.

When you read the temptations
as being about learning to let go
of the lies we tell ourselves about
what makes us who we are –
letting go of the need to do,
to have and to be approved of
and trusting rather in God,
you can see how it does actually make
a good Bible reading for Lent,
but just as valuable to reflect on now.

ⁱ Nouwen, in a series of messages entitled "Being the Beloved" on the Crystal Cathedral Ministries' *Hour of Power* television show in 1992, quoted in Christopher L. Heuret, *The Sacred Enneagram* (Zondervan, 2017).