

1st Sunday in Lent – B
Text – James 1:14

But each person is tempted when he is lured & enticed by his own desire.

BY HIS OWN DESIRE

A group of friends had joined a weight-loss organization. After an hour of intense aerobic exercise, the instructor took them through some dietary training. She held up an apple & a candy bar. “What are the attributes of this apple,” she asked, “and how do they relate to our diet?” “Low in calories” & “lots of fiber” were among the answers.

The instructor then detailed what was wrong with eating candy & concluded, “Apples are not only more healthful but also less expensive. Do you know I paid 75 cents for this candy bar?” As she held aloft the forbidden treat, every eye in the classroom was fixated upon it, & from the back of the room, a small voice spoke up, “I’ll give you a dollar for it.” **PAUSE**

“After these things God tested Abraham...” That’s how the OT reading began. A well known story among us, is also a somewhat fearful story because of the extreme commitment shown by Abraham; a commitment to God seemingly beyond our reach. If we struggle in resisting a candy bar, imagine the struggle to obey God in lifting the knife over your son.

Commitment, resisting temptation, & practicing self-control, those are virtues that today’s Scripture readings hold out to our ears, & before our eyes. Those three virtues are in sharp contrast to the vice the sermon text focuses upon, “But each person is tempted when he is lured & enticed by his own desire.”

Now, desiring a candy bar is not evil in & of itself. It’s evil only in relationship to other circumstances, such as how many candy bars have you eaten already today, or

how many apples. In the same way desire for sexual expression is not evil in & of itself, but it is evil if it's taken out of the relationship God designed it for, which is marriage. Desire can be good, & it can be evil. The determining factor is, "What is the object of your desire?" Jesus Himself should be the object, not what He can get for us. The 73rd Psalm gives a godly example, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides You. My flesh & my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart & my portion forever."

Job 21 gives an ungodly example of desire: "They spend their days in prosperity... They say to God, 'Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of your ways. What is the Almighty that we should serve Him? And what profit do we get if we pray to Him?'" Did you hear their complaint that God isn't giving them what they desire?

"But each person is tempted when he is lured & enticed by his own desire." See if the following statements don't have a ring of truth to them, concerning the struggles you face:

When we're sad we desire a Jesus to make us happy. If we can't find a job we desire a Jesus who'll get one for us. If a son or daughter is going astray we desire a Jesus who'll bring them back. When sick we desire a Jesus to make us well. In each situation Jesus easily ends up in 2nd place, because 1st belongs to what we desire to gain from Him.

Too often, Jesus is not the object of our desires. Martin Luther's profound insight is that it is our faith which creates such false gods. All human beings have a spiritual nature. That's how our heavenly Father created us. The effect of sin is to turn that

spiritual nature away from its true object, which is Jesus Himself. The true object of faith is not what Jesus can give us.

Do we desire the candy more than Jesus? That's what makes our desire sinful. That's how our sinful desires lure & entice us away from the proper relationship to Christ. He is not a candy machine. He is not a magic cure for whatever ails or troubles us. He is our Brother & Savior who gave His holy life in exchange for our sinful one. He gave His holiness in exchange for our sin.

Just like our culture today celebrates the sexual act apart from the relationship, so too our sinful nature wants to celebrate what we gain from Jesus, like forgiveness, apart from a relationship with His body the Church. The Bible makes it clear that the Church is the body of Christ, no matter how ugly God's church may appear in the here & now.

To say I can be a Christian without belonging to a congregation, without that relationship to a congregation, is like desiring the forgiveness God offers while rejecting a relationship with God. That puts us on thin ice with the 1st commandment, which is the very thing James is warning about in his 1st chapter, "I am being tempted by God."

To do so is an attempt to place our heavenly Father beneath us. In contrast, James places the blame for sin squarely upon our own shoulders, upon our own desires. Have we become more attached to the blessings our Savior gives, than to our Savior Himself? It is by God's design that we come together as the body of Christ to receive forgiveness, life & salvation.

What desires have we allowed to come between us & our heavenly Father? Are they something as risqué as sexual desires, or something as mundane as candy bars? Do

the things you're responsible for, whether at work or at home, take away from your alone time with Jesus? Is your spiritual attention focused more on the blessings than it is on God's Son? *PAUSE*

Then today's sermon text is for you, because it's a response to James' opening sentence, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." God already knows the source of our sin & it is us. Only a sinner would be so foolish as to deny it.

Any denial at all, on our part, is simply more proof of our sinful desires, of the way we distance ourselves from the relationship we have with our Father in heaven. To deny our wrongdoing is a rejection of our status in God's family. It's a joining of forces with the devil. Listen to this godly warning from the 4th chapter of Genesis, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." Jesus offered His own life on the cross so that we might be given the tools to rule over sin. Those tools are humility & repentance.

While it's eternally true that our sins are paid for, & completely forgiven, our evil desires still do tremendous damage, to others, & to ourselves. Where our evil desires say things like, "Mine! My way!" our humble & repentant natures say, "Your will Lord, not mine, be done. God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

To remain humble & repentant is to remain steadfast under trial as James was writing about in the Epistle reading. In the final analysis, Satan's chief purposes aren't really that we sin. His primary goals are that we either despair of being forgiven, or that

we see no need for being forgiven. Unbelief is what damns, & the devil desires that for each of us.

Yet God's mercy is so bountiful that even in our trials there are blessings for those who believe in His love. The Psalm writer put it like this in Psalm 119, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes." You see, even in our temptations, our Lord is working just like a parent may take a child's sin & use that example as a tool for teaching.

If we make excuses instead of admitting our fault, our faith is proven to still need work. If we fail the test, we're provided with the opportunity to learn from our failure. As we turn back to God, either circumstance can benefit our relationship with Jesus. Humble & repentant hearts will eventually see God's mercy & draw back to it. God's Spirit wills & enables us so to do.

Even innocent things can arouse the evil desires within us, & Satan is constantly prowling around, like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. So the alertness we're given, from consistently being in the Word of God, sharpens our ability to sense the devil's attacks, even as they come to us through seemingly innocent means. Yet beyond that, the wicked forces around us also appeal directly to our evil desires, & make no mistake about, the evil desires within us are powerful. Commitment, resisting temptation, & practicing self-control, are virtues to be desired & practiced, but when we fail, there's still hope.

That hope is found in the relationship that Jesus Christ established with us. His baptism was part of that establishing as He took on the sins of the world & gave to the

world the holiness God intended for us from the beginning. In our Baptism then, God not only takes away our sins, but He gives us the right to be called sons & daughters of God.

As James wrote, “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth...” It’s as if we had no existence prior to God’s calling us back into relationship with Him, prior to calling us back from the spiritual death of our sinful desires.

The desire for candy may seem quite tame, but taken to Satan’s extreme, many people end up eating themselves to a premature physical death. Spiritual death can also occur as God-given opportunities to turn to Him for comfort are passed over in favor of the comfort found in any of the things of this world.

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee... saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, & the kingdom of God is at hand...’” That is God’s way of saying that He has come to take us into His kingdom, & to create His kingdom in our hearts, as He calls us to be sons & daughters of the King of the universe. His desire is that we value that relationship above all things. Amen.

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.” Amen.