

Hear the words of theologian and mentor to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

—

Howard Thurman:

“There is something in everyone of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”

The longer I live the more convinced I am that life is rooted in our identity. We see in Matthew’s gospel that in the chapter before today’s lesson that Jesus’ identity is confirmed at his baptism. Then, in today’s text, Jesus is led by the Spirit, into the wilderness. In this wilderness, every temptation that occurs is laced with tactics designed to undermine this recently confirmed identity.

History is replete with evidence that those who seek to conquer and control do so in an environment in which the oppressed receive consistent negative messages about their identity. In dualistic structures emphasizing us versus them every negative image and likeness is projected – consistently, persistently, and deliberately.

The longer I live the more convinced I am that our identity is rooted in love. The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis shares a meaningful quote of one of her former professors. Her professor, James D. Loder said, “Love is the non-possessive delight of the unique particularity of the other.”

Jesus of Nazareth embodied a love that the world had never seen. This son of Mary, born in Bethlehem emerged embracing the outcast, filling empty hearts and lives. This newly baptized son walked into the wilderness on the heels of a declaration from heaven stating that God was “well pleased” with him. Just think, no miracles, no loaves multiplied, no blinded eyes opened – none of this had occurred. How could God be pleased with Jesus? He had not even done anything noteworthy. Surely

God was not pleased with Jesus just being...? Surely Jesus earned God's favor because after all isn't that the task about which much of the church is occupied?

Temptation One: stones into bread? To do this would certainly result in popularity. A person known for turning stones to bread would be so popular and well thought of until no one would have voiced "free Barabas." A stones to bread making leader would have all of Palestine in an uproar – especially considering how many stones were around.

Temptation Two: ascend to the top of the religious world order and throw yourself off. God will surely "save" you. Jesus would have been considered superior to all – one who is above even the feeling of our infirmities and weaknesses. Nothing could touch Jesus – especially not the stain of a Cross. The one crucified on the right would have had no one to assure him that he would be remembered in Paradise.

Temptation Three: all of the kingdoms of the world would be yours if you bow down to me. The power packed systems that surround our lives are calling for our allegiance. Lines can be blurred as we seek to serve the Lord, as we seek to find our God given purpose. Jesus saw the dangers of this allusion. Jesus knew that in order to gain you must lose, in order to increase you must decrease. Jesus declared, "You must worship the Lord your God, and serve God alone."

How, then, do we walk into this season of Lent?

Consider the following:

Karoline Lewis: "Jesus leaned into who he is" in this text. What would happen during Lent if we followed Jesus' example? Leaning into who you are is not a burden, a chore, a "giving up" of something. No, leaning into who you are is as natural as breathing.

Lewis: What do we take on that deepens our identity as children of God? What does belonging to God mean? What about leaning into Lent by leaning into **being**?

Can you imagine the fruit that would emerge from the church whose focus is **being** and not doing? What would happen if we leaned into who we are? Remember beloved the words of Howard Thurman:

“There is something in everyone of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”

If God who made us did not make us puppets, wouldn't it be to our advantage to lean into who we are? Let us walk into this season of Lent anticipating insights and depth of revelation. Let us listen ***for the sound of the genuine.***

Opressors know well that divide and conquer keeps hierarchies and dictators secure.

Perhaps the goal of the life of faith isn't to escape limitation but to discover God amid our needs and learn, with Paul, that God's grace is sufficient for us. David Lose

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.