

Text: When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.

I learned a new word while preparing for this sermon and I was so excited about it I just have to share it with you. The word is "apophatic." Now, for those of you who already know this word and who may be disappointed in me that I reached 55 years of age ignorant of it, please forgive me. For the rest of you, I hope you are duly impressed that I can still learn anything at all.

Apophasis in theological terms is also known as the Via Negativa (the Negative Way). The basic premise of negative theology is that God is so far beyond human understanding that we can only say what God is not, because saying what God IS limits God's infinity.

What is startling is that the Negative Way can have some remarkably positive results. It helps us divest ourselves of our illusions and to avoid paths that would turn out to be dead ends. This is precisely what Jesus was discovering in his temptations in the wilderness, because each of the temptations was its own via negativa; each showed him a path NOT to pursue, however reasonable and alluring and good it appeared. Each was a dead end.

The first temptation was to turn stones to bread. Jesus says "No." That is giving people bread and not teaching them how to make bread. It treats people as helpless victims and not as interdependent beings created in the image of God. It enslaves people to dependency and does not empower freedom. The heart of Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is a section called the Grand Inquisitor, who is really the devil in disguise. He confronts Jesus with his insistence on human freedom:

Thou wouldst go into the world, and art going with empty hands, with some promise of freedom which people in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread—for nothing has ever been more insupportable for a person and a human society than freedom. But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and humankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient, though forever trembling, lest Thou withdraw Thy hand and deny them Thy bread. But Thou wouldst not deprive people of freedom and didst reject the offer, thinking, what is that freedom worth if obedience is bought with bread? Thou didst reply that people live not by bread alone. But dost Thou know that for the sake of that earthly bread the spirit of the earth will rise up against Thee? . . . They will understand themselves, at last, that freedom and bread enough for all are inconceivable together, for never, never will they be able to share between them!<sup>1</sup>

Do you see the Via Negativa here, what God is not? God is not a magic mommy or daddy. God is not going to take our freedom from us and thus make us less than human, less than the image of God. Solving humanity's problems for them, solving our problems for us, taking our freedom from us and magically solving our woes keeps us children and does not invite us into the fullest expression of who we are. A savior who denies us our mature humanity is no savior at all. However tempting it must have been to feed everyone, it is not a road Jesus would go down.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Brothers Karamazov; Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky; Translated by Constance Garnett; Chapter 5

The second temptation that Jesus faced was to rule all: "Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the nations of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; . . . worship me, it will all be yours.'

The temptation Jesus faced here was to become the Empire he was resisting and to believe that he could do it differently. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" wrote Lord Acton. The temptation is to believe that Way of the God can be achieved through the power of empire. This is a grave temptation because once people think they are right, and have the power to impose it on others, they can commit the most appalling evil. Once the empire becomes the means to our ends we can easily twist our understanding of good and evil to fit the needs of the empire rather than to follow the Way of God.

Let me give you an example. A January 20, 2010 BBC article reported on the American company Trijicon which was founded by a "devout Christian" and which says it runs to "Biblical standards." And this devout, Christian company is engraving biblical references on the side of sharpshooters' gun sights for use in Iraq and Afghanistan. Just imagine, look down the barrel of your gun, find your human target in the gun sight and be guided with the inscribed words, "Jn 8:2," which in the bible reads, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'. Jesus will light your way to your kill your enemy. Rather than use the Gospel of Jesus Christ to reshape our way in the world, Empire uses its way in the world to reshape the Gospel. Jesus won't go down that road; he uses the Via Negativa to know that God is not empire; he will worship God and not power.

The final temptation is to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple. Scholars debate what this means. One interpretation is that his last temptation may be that of giving in to despair, but not just any despair. Jesus' despair here is the soul despair that comes from knowing that, in worldly terms, his ministry hasn't got a chance: it will end ignominiously and he will be one more martyred prophet ground up in the mills of the world. And where will God's love be then, what difference will it make? The temptation is to believe that it is not worth the effort because it won't change a thing and it will end up on a God-forsaken cross.

A startling example of this temptation in our day is Mother Teresa. On September 19, 1946 she experienced a call from God to go into the slums of Calcutta to care for the "poorest of the poor." And despite the "success" of her work her diaries reveal that she felt utterly and excruciatingly abandoned by God following her call, for she never heard from God again. Ever. Listen to some of the words and phrases she used to describe God's estrangement from her: "untold darkness . . . terrible loneliness . . . utter forsakenness . . . inexplicable brokenness . . . abandonment."<sup>2</sup> And no matter how many people she helped, God remained absent. It was as if her ministry did not earn her a thing. Despair is the temptation we fall prey to when we DO NOT learn that grace is not earned.

Mother Teresa did learn, but it took 40 years, not forty days to overcome this temptation. Forty years! This is hard to understand in our culture, a culture that sometimes uses feel-good

---

<sup>2</sup> All references from *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—the Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*; ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk; MC; New York: Doubleday; 2007.

spirituality as a fashionable substitute for sacrificial religion. Even though she felt spiritual agony for all those decades, even though she felt abandoned, forsaken by God, even though she was tempted to believe her work was simply organizing futility, she still wrote, "I would not like at any price to give up my sufferings." She discovered that the void of God's absence was mitigated by the substance of Jesus' presence. Mother Teresa came to understand that although God was silent, Jesus stood beside her. She came to associate with his wrestling in the wilderness and his despair on the cross. She came to affirm that even if she did not feel the affirming presence of God, she did have the purpose of a mutual ministry with Jesus. Despite the fact that populist atheist writer Christopher Hitchens described her as a "troubled and miserable lady," she remained steadfast in her commitment to love "even the least" in the world as her commitment to living as Jesus lived, loving as Jesus loved, and even to dying as Jesus died—abandoned and alone. Her association with Jesus, her sacrifice and her sufferings became for her an apophatic affirmation of an absent God. The Via Negativa here is that God is not found in earning love, but in being love.

There may be some of you out there who have not faced the dark night of temptations almost too great to be borne. Bless you, and love us. And for you who have faced these temptations: the temptation to solve others' problems for them, the temptation to force your will on others because you know you are right, or the temptation simply to give up and believe it is not worth it because you can't earn it, know that a Way through this has been blazed before you. It is not an easy Way; living a mature life never is. It is not a certain Way; there will always be much we do not know. Although there may not be answers along this Way, there IS meaning—meaning that can only come when we are faithful to the healing way of love in our lives, and in others'.

"I would not like at any price to give up my sufferings" said Mother Teresa. It is a hard road to God, to meaning, to Love. It is apophatic, a via negativa: abundance burgeoning from sacrifice; power discovered in weakness; joy borne from despair. What a strange message of hope the apophatic way offers us. What a curious way for a savior to behave. What a paradox for us who seek to follow the way of the cross. Amen.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER (The Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi)

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
and where there's doubt, faith;  
O Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love;  
for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.  
Amen.