

1st Sunday of Lent

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Over the last several years, I have begun to see and understand Lent, temptations, and the struggles in my life in a different way. It used to be that I thought about those things in terms of self-denial: just say no, don't do this, don't do that; and everything will be fine. But then life got complicated. It wasn't that simple or easy. Just saying no and self-denial were no longer enough. I don't mean that I exchanged self-denial for self-indulgence. I am saying that our lives deserve, and demand more than just saying no. Here is why I say that.

I suspect we have all had times and experiences in our lives when just saying no did not apply. It just wasn't relevant because the issue wasn't a yes-or-no question. Or maybe there were times when the rules simply didn't cover or speak to the situation. What then? Where do we turn?

There have also been times when I followed the rules. I did the right thing. I was who I was supposed to be and did what I was supposed to do. Despite all that, it didn't work out the way I wanted or thought it would. Something was lacking. There was no sense of integrity or fullness. I was compliant but not changed or transformed.

Other times, I claimed particular values and virtues as the things that would guide my life, but then I went out and did the exact opposite of what I claimed to value. Have you ever done that? There was a disconnect between what was going on inside of me and what went on outside of me.

It wasn't enough to just say no. I wanted more. I wanted to have a balance between my inner life and my outer world.

So, I have begun to think about Lent and those places of struggle, what we often call the temptations, not so much in terms of self-denial but more in terms of self-knowledge. Maybe those situations offer us important learnings about ourselves.

I think we often hear today's Old Testament lesson, Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, and today's gospel, Jesus being tempted in the desert, and we hold them in opposition to each other. On the one hand, Adam and Eve got it all wrong, and on the other hand, Jesus got it all right. On the one hand, Adam and Eve were bad, and on the other hand, Jesus was good. I don't necessarily think that's wrong; it just seems a pretty superficial, literal, and exteriorized reading of those texts.

I am not suggesting Jesus got it wrong or that Adam and Eve got it right. I simply want us to find a deeper meaning. I want us to find that deep connection between those two stories, and I think that deep connection is self-knowledge. When you move beyond the dualities of good or bad, right or wrong, what you discover is that both stories are about self-knowledge.

Think about Adam and Eve. They eat the forbidden fruit. Do you remember what happens after they eat? Their eyes are open. So, what does that mean about their eyes before they ate? They were closed. They were seeing with closed eyes, a partial seeing, a blindness. There is something

about eating the fruit that opened Adam and Eve's eyes, giving them a new awareness, awakening them, and bringing them to a new level of consciousness. So maybe they didn't fall into sin as much as they fell into consciousness. They experienced something of themselves and of the world in the same way God does. They knew good and evil. They saw it all. Life and their world just got a whole lot more complicated, and potentially more real and more beautiful.

Think about the times in your life when that happened to you. There has been a new awareness, a new awakening, a new consciousness, and you see the world and yourself in a brand new way. Often, that seems to follow some sort of stumbling and falling, a failure, a turning away from God, another, or ourselves.

With that new consciousness, we might see beauty and goodness, but we also see pain and disfigurement. We see the places of wholeness and integrity, as well as the places of brokenness and disintegration. And I don't mean that we see that just in the world around us. We see it within ourselves. We see the truth and reality of our lives. We see and understand ourselves to be a mixture of both. We see our contradictions. We are neither entirely good nor entirely bad. We are both. That's why life gets complicated. That's why it is not enough to just say no.

If we look beyond their failure to say no, we can see that the garden experience brought Adam and Eve to self-knowledge. By the same token,

if we look beyond Jesus saying no, we can see his desert experience as having brought him to self-knowledge.

Immediately before Jesus goes to the desert, he is baptized. While Jesus is standing in the baptismal waters, a voice from heaven speaks and says, **“This is my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”** Then Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted. He goes to the wilderness having been told that he is God’s son. He goes to the wilderness having heard that he is beloved of God. He goes to the wilderness knowing that his Father is pleased with him. And all of that is given before Jesus ever faces the first temptation. Whether Jesus said yes or no to the temptations would not determine if he is God’s son, if he is beloved of God, or if God is pleased with him. Those are not the consequences or rewards for passing the wilderness temptations, but the preconditions of those temptations. Grace always precedes us.

So maybe Jesus’ time in the desert wasn’t so much about proving or giving something to God as much as it was about Jesus learning and experiencing something about himself, that he is God’s son, that he is God’s beloved, and that God is pleased with him. Maybe there was something Jesus needed to learn about himself so that he could come out of the desert knowing who he was, knowing to whom he belonged, and knowing his message for the world. The self-knowledge Jesus gained in the wilderness formed and shaped his public ministry of healing, teaching, and preaching.

If the wilderness was a place of self-knowledge for Jesus, might it not also be for us? If the garden and their failure to say no was a place of self-knowledge for Adam and Eve, might it not also be for us?

So, what if we took these next forty days of Lent and let go of the questions about good or bad, right or wrong, and whether we are enough, and sought self-knowledge? I am not talking about self-knowledge in a narrow, selfish, and egotistical way. I am talking about self-knowledge that is profound, that reveals our most authentic self, that makes us face and examine ourselves, not to make judgments or inflict punishment, but to seek healing and new life. I am talking about the self-knowledge that turns our gaze back to God.

If we choose the path of self-knowledge, then we will need to observe ourselves, be watchful, and ask difficult questions. What are the painful and wounded places in me that cause me to act out in ways that are not good for me or others? What are the buttons in me that get so easily pushed, that cause me to react with words or actions that I do not want to say or do? What are the ways in which I have contributed to the pain of the world, and how might I now begin contributing to the healing of the world? When and where have I fallen short and missed the mark? What are the patterns and habits that direct and control my life? What possesses me? Do I truly believe I am God's beloved son or daughter? If so, how do I live that? If not, why not? In what ways am I living an authentic life, and in what ways am I not?

This self-knowledge will take us so much further than will self-denial. This doesn't mean self-denial isn't important or that it doesn't have a positive, necessary role in our lives and during Lent. I just want to give self-knowledge a higher priority and put self-denial in its service.

I think God wants more for us and offers more.

What if, during this season of Lent, we hear God asking us, **“What are you learning about yourself? And what do you need from me?”**

That just might be the start of a holy Lent. It would be Lent in which our eyes were opened to the truth about ourselves, who we are, and what we do. It would be a Lent in which, despite things done and left undone, we would rediscover and maybe hear for the first time that we too are God's beloved children with whom he is pleased. Maybe it would be a Lent in which we could let go of judgments and scorekeeping. Maybe it would be a Lent that would lead us to new life, a fuller life, a life in which we discover that we are God's glory.

Have you ever thought of yourself as the glory of God? Most of us probably don't. Maybe that's because we don't know ourselves as God knows us. Maybe if we did, we might see, think, speak, and live differently. **“The glory of God,”** said Irenaeus, a bishop of the third century, **“is a human being fully alive.”**

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What are you learning about yourself? And what do you need from God? Let's be God's glory. Today, tomorrow, and the day after. Now and forever. **Amen.**