

Faith Touched By Lent: Foundational Interdependence

Luke 4:1-13

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The Gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke each report three temptations of Jesus. The content of the overall story is the same in both, and both tell of temptation number 1 in the same position. They then switch the order of the second and third. For Matthew, number 2 is number 3 in Luke; and, for Luke, temptation number 2 is number 3 in Matthew. That bit of information can serve as your “Temptations of Jesus” trivia for today.

To summarize the story, however, using the order of Luke’s account, Jesus has gone to the wilderness prayerfully to consider his identity and his life. The Scriptures say he was tempted there by Satan, a character who may or may not be “real” in and of himself; yet the temptations, in the mind of Jesus, are as real as any a human being has ever faced. Satan is, at least, the name given to the voice proposing the temptations. It’s a name that means “God’s Adversary,” and the three temptation proposals, as reported, are: (1) “bread from rocks,” (2) “worship traded for authority and power,” and (3) “testing an extreme supernatural hypothesis against reality.” Jesus thinks and prays. He recalls verses of Scripture which encourage him to answer in the negative each of the three temptations.

This isn’t, though, the end of the story. Not for this morning. Not for any time. The story never ends – it never ends! – with Jesus’ successful standing up to temptations from the adversarial whispers. There is always more.

We can characterize the temptations: (1) as having to do with the “material” (real stuff, like a thought that a rock can be turned into a loaf of bread); (2) as having to do with the “relational” (concerning to whom or what you give yourself with serious, if not ultimate, devotion); and (3) as having to do with the “psychological” (what’s thrilling if you test extreme limits, like risking one’s body against natural gravity to test the hypothetical supernatural quality of God’s care). The “material,” the “relational,” and the “psychological.”

These temptations / these challenges are as much temptations and challenges to Jesus as they are temptations and challenges for you, for me, for every human being, any time, any place.

Jesus goes to the wilderness prayerfully to consider his identity and his life: Who he is, and how he is who he is.

Doesn’t every person face the same questions? Who am I? And how am I who I am?

The potential sin, or sins, Jesus faced can be portrayed as deeds or actions. At the heart of it all, however, is identity. Who am I? And how am I who I am? **The “giving in” to the temptations (1, 2, or 3) is not nearly so important, in and of itself, should that happen, just as the standing up to the temptations (1, 2, and 3) is not nearly so**

important as Jesus three times realizing his identity as one who owes ultimate allegiance to God, who is Lord of heaven and earth, and then deciding and acting according to who he is and how he is who he is in relation to God. As a person / as a human being, Jesus is one who owes ultimate allegiance to the God. Similarly, this Scripture has lasting significance for you and me and others, both as we are persons / as we are human beings, and as our identity is at the heart of this story.

In the 1950s, writer Max Schulman created a character named Dobie Gillis, whose late high school and immediate post-high school years were chronicled from 1959 to 1963 on a CBS television comedy series, “The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis.” Dobie’s goals for his life were popularity, quick wealth, and the attention of beautiful women (for whom he seemed to be not a natural match). With some frequency, Dobie visited a park which contained a replica of a statue known as “The Thinker,” the original having been crafted in 1902 by the Frenchman, Auguste Rodin.

Whenever Dobie visits that park and statue, he usually shared with the audience, in monolog fashion, a particular dilemma he was facing, thinking about, and evaluating at the time. Your goals in life (and mine) may or may not be popularity, quick wealth, and the attention of beautiful women or handsome men. In comic fashion, however, Max Schulman, for a few years, invited audiences to consider the challenges of identity and relationships through the eyes and minds of young men and women from the ages of 17 to 21.

Such challenges, of course, begin before the age of 17 and continue in various forms far beyond the age of 21. Who are you? Who am I? And “how” are we the individual persons we are?

Certainly there are temptations of the self / of the individual. As “The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis” suggested, you and I both know that. What we also know, but sometimes overlook, is how individual temptations related to personal identity and “humanness” ALWAYS are the content of larger community temptations.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s 1880 novel, The Brothers Karamazov, set in Russia during the 1800s, one brother tells another brother a parable, in which, during the Great Inquisition (the medieval effort to establish truth against all threats of heresy), an officer of the Church supposedly speaks with Jesus, who is attentive yet, at the same time, is silent. In justifying the Church’s authority, the Grand Inquisitor tells silent Jesus how the temptations he (Jesus) experienced – as the temptations of all people – create anxiety and disorder for human beings of such magnitude that the Church best serves the happiness and welfare of people by taking away the opportunity to wrestle with serious questions of identity and relationships.

Imagine that: Religious authorities and institutions taking away the opportunity for individuals and communities to wrestle with serious questions of identity and relationships. In different clothing, we could also recognize a philosophy of government desiring to take away the opportunity of persons and groups to wrestle with serious questions of identity and relationships – or we can imagine political groups campaigning for endorsement by a majority of voters on the promise that they will

reform government so that all important answers will be provided by their new style and philosophy of governing. Such reform could be promised by a political group that called itself conservative or liberal, democratic, libertarian, fascist, or communist. Any could tempt the citizenry with a platform of reform, and actually be hoping to take away freedom from processes which make reform and continuing freedom difficult or make us reform and continuing freedom against laws they would invoke.

Jesus was tempted to choose “a way of being” and “ways to be” which broke with the mysterious relationship to which God called him. He was so tempted. It is a relationship which includes challenges and dilemmas and on-going identity struggles day after day after day. In the power of God’s Spirit and grace, however, he referred to other parts of Scripture and chose an orientation which reaffirmed his connection to God and to God’s world and to God’s people. He chose not independent fulfillment for his own personhood. He chose, rather, interdependence on God for life with all others, his brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Interdependence seeks the healthiest “good” which can be negotiated for each person and group. In 1989, Stephen Covey published his book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. In that book, he writes:

Independent thinking alone is not suited to interdependent reality. Independent people who do not have the maturity to think and act interdependently may be good individual producers, but they won't be good leaders or team players. They're not coming from the paradigm of interdependence necessary to succeed in marriage, family, or organizational reality.

Foundational interdependence may be a mouthful of syllables and a complex-sounding concept, but it’s the answer Jesus gave for himself when he choose an identity and way of serving God and God’s people, when he wrestled with the material, the relational, and the psychological.

Interdependence is the foundation in life God desires, no matter what certain politicians or church officers or friends or family or anyone else promises or tempts you to believe and do to the contrary. Interdependence includes working together, thinking together, praying together, envisioning together, with our differences and with respect, having the understanding all the time that our efforts together will often be complex and include sacrifice, but can have God-blessed results.

No stones to bread, no ruling over kingdoms of the world, no being saved from self-indulgence. Jesus struggled with that and understood. Day by day, in his spirit and way, with God’s help, so can we – yet it is never automatic or easy.

– All honor and praise be to God.