Sunday, March 9, 2014: Matthew 4:1-11

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Sunday's Coming Premium
March 5, 2014

Do you give something up for Lent? Centuries ago members of communities all gave up the same things, but these days it's more a matter of individual choice. There is a trend to give up technology or screen time, but giving up certain foods is still the most common option. A few years ago, when I was a college chaplain, I served tea and cakes after chapel whenever a student had a birthday. But my own birthday fell in Lent, when several in the chapel group had given up chocolate and cakes.

Anxious not to let my birthday go uncelebrated, one student volunteered a solution. "You know how some people break their fast on saints' feast days?" she said. "Why don't we find a saint whose feast day is your birthday? Then we can have cake and a clear conscience!" This elaborate ruse met with the group's approval, and they set about finding a suitable saint. There were three candidates: an Irishman and an Italian who lived short but exciting lives before dying glorious martyrs' deaths and a third who was dull by comparison. He lived a saintly life in a nondescript place before retiring to tend his orchard. I chose the dull one for this simple reason: I have never found anything remotely appealing in the idea of becoming a martyr. I don't like pain; I'd like to live a happy, peaceful life for as long as possible. I suppose I might have to accept martyrdom if the circumstances demanded it. But why would anyone want to be a martyr?

T. S. Eliot explored this idea in his portrayal of Archbishop Thomas Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Eliot's Becket dreamed of martyrdom because he was far less afraid of pain and death than he was of the prospect that his life might be insignificant and forgotten. Becket faces four temptations in the drama; the first three parallel the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. But the fourth brings Becket face-to-face with his dream of martyrdom as the tempter asks him:

> What can compare with glory of Saints
> Dwelling forever in presence of God? . . .
> Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest
> On earth, to be high in heaven.

Becket realizes the subtlety of the temptation. If he became a martyr to satisfy his own desire for fame and immortality, he would not be a true martyr but a traitor to his own ideals. He concludes:

> The last temptation is the greatest treason:
> To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

This dynamic underlies all the biblical temptation stories. The temptations of Jesus mirror those of Adam and Eve—personal security, proof of God, and reaching one's destiny, all of which are good things in themselves. But the temptations are not about what appears on the surface, but about motives and methods.

If temptation were all about blatant wrongdoing, it would be far easier to avoid. Most people do not want to commit crimes or indulge in dissolute and destructive behavior. But what about seeing a way to achieve something good by a shortcut that just marginally blurs true integrity or allowing a gift to seem altruistic when it masks personal pride? True temptation lies in our capacity to justify the means by the end and nudge ourselves into tiny, incremental compromises.

Doing the right thing for the wrong reason becomes the wrong thing. But the reverse is also true. Sometimes the right thing to do is deemed wrong by accepted standards. Someone steals in order to feed a starving child, for instance, and is imprisoned by a system that trapped him or her in poverty in the first place. Is the lawbreaker wrong or is the system wrong? The temptation stories are not there to make us law-abiding citizens but to search out our deepest motivations for our actions. In the process they might require that we overturn a law here and there.

As we ate a delicious birthday cake that Thursday afternoon in Lent, my students and I talked about our elaborate joke of choosing a saint's day so that we could eat cake. That led us to ask: What is the relationship between action and motive, and what really makes something a sin? The word sin has become unfashionable, perhaps precisely because it's been reduced to describing a list of behaviors that some authority has deemed unacceptable. But its true meaning takes us to the more fundamental level of why we do what we do. If we stay connected to the truth and

goodness that reside in God rather than needing lists of things we should or shouldn’t do, we can live by the motto drawn from Augustine’s teaching—“Love God, and do what you like.”

Overcoming temptation, then—for us as well as for Jesus—is not about obeying rules. It’s about identifying our underlying motives, about the choices set before us, and about taking the ones that make us fully human in honest service of our calling.

At the table one student said, “I gave up cake for Lent, but I was really doing it to lose weight, not to draw closer to God.” Another said, “I gave up chocolate and cake and alcohol, but I wanted everyone to admire me for being really spiritual.”

What is Lent for, really? Mirroring Jesus’ experience in the wilderness, it is a time to let the light of truth reveal our motivations, to recalibrate our spiritual lives, to reorient ourselves as followers of Christ. If it helps to give something up, then by all means do it. But let’s never reduce Lent to giving up cake.