

“That Little Word ‘If’ ”
Delivered Sunday, March 13, 2011, Lent 1
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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Before there was the wilderness, there was a garden. (1) God created the world and saw that it was very good. God created human beings and said, “Good, too.” Then God gave human beings everything they could possibly need for abundant life, as well as enormous freedom in creation. They could eat their fill of the abundance. They had good work to do – to name the creatures, to care for them, and to till the land. There was just one tiny little rule: one tree was off limits – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You know what happens. The serpent slithers up to Eve and tempts her to eat from the tree anyway, and then she hands the fruit to Adam and they both eat. Just what was that temptation all about? Everything was good up to that point. God simply drew a little line in the garden: human beings on this side; God on this side. Tree of Life on your side, tree of the knowledge of good and evil on my side. Stay on your own side if you know what’s good for you.” (2)

You see God had made human beings to be just that ... thoroughly, authentically, wholly human. We were made to live before God in God’s good gift of freedom as ourselves. But the serpent hisses a different invitation.... it hisses a little IF, inviting Eve and Adam not to be themselves, but instead to become “like God.” The irony of it all is that human beings not only ended up not being like God, but we have ended up not being our true selves either! Immediately Adam and Eve sewed together some leaves in an attempt to cover themselves up; and we follow suit, so to speak. We, too, clothe ourselves with all manner of things in a feeble attempt to hide from God and to hide from each other. Adam pointed in blame at Eve, and she pointed to the serpent. And we have been pointing at each other ever since... always looking around for someone to blame for whatever has gone wrong with us.

From that story, we move to the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, which is a counterpoint to all that went wrong in the garden. Rather than standing in lush, flowering abundance, Jesus stands in the barren desert. Rather than being given all the fruit of the earth at his fingertips; Jesus has nothing, fasting for forty days and nights. He was famished, Matthew says. But just as in the Garden, trouble shows up in

the guise of another tempter. Once again, an invitation is hissed, beginning with that little word, IF. “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread...” No, Jesus says.... And with that “no” Jesus becomes the one human being in all the world, for all time, who refuses to give this tempting voice the honor due only to God’s voice.

A second time the tempter speaks, using that little word IF – “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from this high temple. For a second time, Jesus refuses. He refuses to do something spectacular, something super-human, once and for all. He chooses, you see, to be thoroughly, authentically, wholly human -- as he chooses to walk in God’s lowly paths of love and service.

A third time, the tempter spreads his arms wide over the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor. “All these I will give you (and here it comes again...) IF you fall down and worship me, rather than God.” For the third time, Jesus does what Adam and Eve and every other human being does not do... he decides to be the complete, God-created human being he is meant to be in this life.

This is our greatest challenge in life: to worship only God. To worship God above all other little gods – whether they be material things, or the work we do, or even our families who mean so much to us. God comes first, and Jesus is the only human being who was ever able to do what the rest of us simply cannot do. The Letter to the Hebrews says it this way: “He was tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

This is what the season of Lent is all about – we are invited to follow the pattern of Jesus Christ; not to be super-human, rather to be simply human, especially whenever we contend with that little word “IF” which tempts us to be more than we are meant to be.

In her work among the poor in San Francisco, and through the food pantry ministry of her church, Sara Miles came to know Zoe. Once homeless, Zoe had gotten off drugs, stayed sober, found a place to live, and begun going to church regularly, but she was wracked by doubt. Her early childhood had been a living hell of violent abuse. “How could there be a God, she said, who would allow such terrible things to happen to her? How could Jesus be real? No longer numbed by drugs, the memories of violence and pain got clearer and clearer. In a particularly bad moment, Zoe called Sara on the phone and threatened to, as she put it, “break up with God.” “Jesus says love your mother and father,” she

went on, “and I just can’t do that. That’s *wrong* what they did to me. I was just a little kid. I can’t be a Christian if I have to forgive them.” And then she would cry and cry.

Sara says, “All we could do was touch her... all we could do was feed her... all we could do with Zoe was give her work to do caring for others. We asked Zoe, just like the rest of our broken, hurting volunteers, to lift sacks of potatoes and put bread on tables and offer food to everyone. We asked her to give her hands and her back and her heart away. And to tell the truth. The truth is that suffering can become the foundation of faith, if we are not scared to touch the sore places with love. One day, about a year after touching and feeding and giving Zoe work to do helping others, Zoe approached Sara and said, “I don’t *want* to forgive them. But I want to be free. I am sick of carrying my parents around.”

Sara went to their priest, Paul, and he prepared a ceremony for Zoe. She’d already been baptized as an infant, and they decided they weren’t going to erase the past and pretend it didn’t exist. Instead, they asked her to affirm her baptismal vows aloud, in celebration. It had been a painful year – a year of being sober, a year of living with the truth, a year of struggling to forgive.

Sara Miles describes the ceremony: “We stood close around the alter, in the middle of the empty room, touching each other. “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” asked Paul, reading the Episcopal vows of baptism, his voice deep and slow. “I will,” said Zoe, “with God’s help.” “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” “I will,” Zoe said, “with God’s help.” I kept my hand tight on her shoulder,” Sara writes, “and our breaths rose and fell together. When we were done praying, we shared little glasses of milk that, adapting an ancient church practice, we’d set out on the alter with spoons of honey – so that the first thing in your new life will be sweet.

Then Zoe went out, and Paul and I washed up the glasses, and started talking about other things we had to do at work, and went back to our phone calls and meetings. Afterwards, walking up to the deli for a sandwich, Paul stopped and turned to me, and said quietly on the sidewalk, “Death has no power at all.” (3)

What is so amazingly, perfectly human about Jesus is that he is the only human being ever who does not try to be more than human. Through pain and suffering, Jesus touches us so that we can touch each other. He keeps his hand tight on our shoulders. He helps show us how to resist being tempted by that little word, "IF," to believe that we are little gods. He sets out a path for us, to journey with him in love and service, touching the pain of others. He shows us how to love God so thoroughly, authentically and wholly that we are free to be human... thoroughly, authentically and wholly human.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) I am indebted to Kim Richter for her sermon by the same title, preached 2/15/05 at Grace Covenant Presbyterian, Asheville, for her holding these two texts together and giving me words to do the same.
- 2) Barbara Brown Taylor, "Remaining Human," *Christian Century*, Feb. 4-14, 1996.
- 3) Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: feeding, healing, raising the dead*, p. 121-124.