

Not Relevant But Contemplative
Matthew 4:1-4
1st Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

Promotion is a big deal in academia. You are known by your “rank”. It determines how much you get paid, what jobs you are eligible for, what committees you can serve on. One of my departmental responsibilities at Temple University is to chair the Promotions Committee. And while there are expressed rules for how to apply for promotion, we know as a committee that there are also some *hidden* requirements that sometimes are used as criteria to determine whether one is advanced or not. Because of this, our Promotions Committee works very hard to comb through hundreds of pages of documents to ensure we have extracted the most significant details to put in a two page letter that will start the ball rolling toward the recognition that we hope another deserves; in short, our job is to “sell” our colleagues to the Director, who in turn “sells” them to the Dean and the Dean’s Committee, the membership of which is secret! So, we take our job very seriously; because the candidate is up against the promotion requests from the entire university faculty, it is important that we identify all the ways this person is *more* than qualified for promotion within the parameters of the data they provide, to make them the *best* candidate who has ever applied!

We live in a society where our *credentials* matter. We are encouraged to make ourselves known and relevant. We want to hear from the experts, regarding everything from the latest COVID-19 updates to what restaurant we should pick and what book we should read. We want to be up to date, in the know, useful. Much like my colleagues trying to “sell” themselves for promotion, we are doing our own promotion work all the time, conveying to our friends, co-workers, neighbors, employers: “You need me! I can do something for you! I have something

important to say.” It used to be called “self-promotion”; now it’s call “personal branding”. We find ourselves doing that as a community of faith right here in our neighborhood: how can we be valuable to these folks, we wonder. How can *we matter*, this small, faithful congregation eager to make a positive difference in the world!

We have been convinced we need to “promote” ourselves to the world in order to be relevant! I think this is especially true of the church at a time when our society and culture are devaluing who we are and what we have to offer. We want to be wanted, needed! So, churches list their accomplishments, tout their memberships, spruce up their buildings and hope people will come, hope people will find the *need* for communities of faith. Not only do *we* want to be relevant, we want *God* to be relevant! We *want* the world to want us.

And it seems to me that is exactly the nature of the first temptation Jesus experiences in Matthew’s wilderness account: *the temptation of being relevant*. Matthew four tells it this way: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Note that the word “if” used here is thought to be better translated as “since.” “Since you are the Son of God...”.

Scholars often talk about this account as a “test”, but it helps to remember that not all tests are bad! While you may frown on a particular test you remember from your student days, and trust me, students do not like tests anymore these days than you did then, some tests are positive! When you go to the doctor and she orders a test, you are usually glad because it could help solve your medical problem. Testing a car before you buy is not a bad thing! So, when we think about

Jesus being “tested” we need to remember that this doesn’t have to be seen as something awful, but rather the test is to see if his heart is in the right place to begin his ministry among the people.

“If [or “since”] you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” This is a test of relevance! There were plenty of folks all around who were hungry and in fact, after forty days of fasting, *Jesus was hungry!* The Tempter is saying, “Since you are God, feed the hungry! Show that you matter! Fix what is broken, change what isn’t working. YOU have the power...make yourself useful!” Plenty of people might be saying similar things right now: “If or since you are God, stop this virus before it becomes a pandemic!” “If or since you are God, end poverty! Stop warfare, heal my illness, give us peace!” The question is one of relevance! *Can* you make a difference, you who claim the name of God? Show us how and why you matter!

It’s a temptation I think we can relate to as we continue to discern our own purpose here on this corner; it might be the same temptation you face at your job, in a relationship, in your community. It’s the temptation to *prove ourselves*: by our resumes and pedigrees, by our bank accounts and number of supporters, by our knowledge and our possessions, by the things we do and even the things we don’t: the temptation to be necessary, the temptation to be needed, the temptation to be relevant.

And yet Jesus resists it. Oh, later on in Matthew’s gospel he *does* feed the hungry, multiplying loaves and fishes to feed the masses. Perhaps this was the preparation for that moment. But that moment isn’t now. Instead of giving in to something he could have easily done, something he could have easily become, Jesus *instead* turns his heart toward God. ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,’” he says. In the face of the question of relevance, Jesus chooses *not* to prove he is needed but rather to hang onto this mission, his purpose: to demonstrate his relationship with God.

In his book *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen recalls moving to a community of developmentally disabled adults where he was to be their pastor. He came with a long list of accomplishments, including education, books, lectureships and notoriety across the globe. As he sat with his new “congregation” at dinner he was “introduced” by one resident to another: “This is Henri: he doesn’t eat meat; he’s vegetarian and he’s Presbyterian!” *That’s* what mattered in the moment to this young man, although for all the things Henri was, he wasn’t Presbyterian. Nouwen recalls it as a humbling moment, a moment when the barriers he had put between himself and these people came down. After reflecting on this experience Nouwen writes that he is “...convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way *Jesus* came to reveal God’s love.” (30) Being vulnerable, being real, being nothing more than loved by God allows us to relate to one another, and to God.

The reality is that while our society asks these questions of relevance, not many of us feel relevant. We “sell” ourselves to each other as a cover up our own uncertainty about whether we matter. Nouwen understands that if we can embrace our own irrelevance, like Jesus did, and turn instead to God, then we will remain in solidarity with the rest of those who are also feeling irrelevant. (35) The right question to ask ourselves is not if we are relevant, if people respect or notice us, but if we *love God*, if we know God incarnated in Jesus. (37) Knowing God’s loving heart is to “consistently, radically and very concretely... announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation or despair begins to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God.” (38)

In order to be this, to live this, to *know* this love of God in Jesus, we must be *present* to God and know that God is present to us. We must have an *intimate relationship* with God in prayer:

focusing on God's love for us (even when we can't fully grasp or believe it; maybe especially then) We don't have to understand it, just embrace it. And invite God's love deeper and deeper into our beings.

During this Lenten season, our call is not to be relevant but to be contemplative. That is, to focus our heart's attention on one simple thing: God's love for us. It's that easy and that difficult. Make it your mantra: "God loves me" whether you have been saying those words to yourself all your life or whether you can hardly say them now for the first time. "God loves me". Can you say it? "Say: "I am God's beloved." And say it over and over until you know it is true. Not on the surface, but deep down in your heart, *know* that it's true. Because that's really all that matters. Don't work at being relevant, focus on being contemplative. And start with: God loves me.

