

March 13, 2011

## **The First Sunday in Lent**

Matthew 4:1-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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### **Obedience**

It may seem strange to be thinking about *Saturday Night Live* in the midst of the solemnity of the First Sunday in Lent, but like some of you, I have recently read the incomparable Tina Fey's "*Lessons from Late Night*"<sup>1</sup> in *The New Yorker*. Even if you have not watched SNL for a while, you will certainly be familiar with Tina Fey's remarkable capacity to almost channel Sarah Palin which she did often, and in good spirits, during the last Presidential election. In the article, she recounts her first meeting with the legendary producer Lorne Michaels who, in 1997 was thought to be "looking to diversify." As Tina Fey put it, "Only in comedy, by the way, does an *obedient* white girl from the suburbs count as diversity." She goes on to describe her first meeting with Mr. Michaels and then what she learned for her ever-changing relationship with him as her producer over the years, reflecting on the differences between male and female comedians along the way.

I bring this up because she calls herself *obedient*—an obedient white girl from the suburbs. 'Obedient' here is a kind of self denigrating put-down. Obedient people are not very funny or very edgy or very interesting. We associate obedience with being dutiful or submissive, conforming to the law or to social norms or to authority. Obedience is related to obeisance which is expressing deference through what we might call 'bowing and scraping.' The way we talk about and think about obedience is pretty utilitarian-- (Keep the speed limit or you will get in trouble), or pretty submissive to do with the currying of favor from someone in power -- (obey the teacher and she will like me). I had a Presbyterian assistant once who came to the annual conference of the diocese and did not hear our bishop's intended humor when he thanked us all for our 'obedience.' The irony was lost on my friend and I don't think he ever went to another of those meetings.

When Tina Fey characterizes women comedians over and against men, she says the ones she knows "are all dutiful daughters, good citizens, mild mannered college graduates. Maybe we women gravitate toward comedy because it is a socially acceptable way to break rules."

Bear that in mind as we remember that in our tradition, obedience is considered a virtue. Many monks take vows of poverty, chastity and *obedience*. How can something as dull and mechanical as figuring out the rules and following them be a virtue?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/backissues/2011/03/saturday-night-live.html>

Matthew is very interested in Jesus' obedience as an earthy and real human matter. It began with his "fulfilling all righteousness" (Matthew 1.15) at his baptism, doing here and now what the 'higher righteousness of God' requires. Clearly this was not a simple obedience to some particular law or other as there is no law that would have necessitated Jesus' baptism by itself. Jesus is obedient to something else, but something that includes the gracious gift of identity that Israel is given in the Law. Our laws tell us something about who we are and what we value. This theme of obedience to God and God's Word in the here and now continues in today's story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Obedience as a virtue has been corrupted, not least by those holding on to power, so that instead of making us strong, they exploit our weakness making us cravenly submissive at worst.<sup>2</sup> Obey the law as we interpret it and you will be safe cried the leaders of Israel in Jesus' day. (I hear the same falsehood in calls to trust the wisdom of the Proposed Anglican Covenant: 'Be obedient and the communion will hold together'.)

Real obedience is not about submission to authorities although that submission, chosen freely, might be part of discovering the people we were created to be and living toward that vision. Real obedience is the kind out of which Jesus can come to real clarity as he submits to the baptism of John and in the mythical story of the wilderness he resists our all too human temptations. He resists our temptations to find our identity in consumption, to think we will know who we are in being good servants by putting naïve trust in institutional claims to salvific power, or even suspecting that we are most who we are when we have dominion over others. He acts out of that same clarity of identity when he overturns the tables of the money changers, challenges craven interpretations of the law that keep the poor in their poverty and even when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane before his passion and death. Obedience is bound up with living and acting with integrity toward what is of ultimate worth and what is most true about who we are. As an English monk and academic once put it, "Obedience consists of discovering what you most truly and deeply are or, better, what you have it in you to be, and of being loyal to the insight that you have thus received."<sup>3</sup> In fact we might say that we do talk about obedience, but we tend to use other language: 'becoming who you were created to be', 'living toward what really matters' and so on. The reason to keep the word 'obedience' is that it makes it clear that the source and goal of our life is outside our self; of put yet another way, we are ec-centric.

The season of Lent marks all those times when we seek to strip away everything that might distort our vision so that we can see ourselves and others more clearly than before. As we find our vision less distorted, so we can choose to live with greater integrity as the people we were created to be. Maybe what seemed like

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<sup>2</sup> Some of these ideas come from a sermon by Harry Williams CR from a collection called *Poverty, Chastity and Obedience: The True Virtues* (Mitchell Beazley, 1975)

<sup>3</sup> Williams p.83

brilliant insight and courage, or cutting edge humor, yesterday, will seem like mere rule breaking tomorrow. In our fasting and our prayer and our almsgiving we seek to return to that place where we can pursue true and real obedience as children of the Love that made us for Love.

One last *caveat* is in order: Just as Jesus had to exercise his obedience to God in relation to those around him, even if the relation was marked primarily by conflict, so we too are necessarily societal beings who cannot be obedient to any insight we may have been given about ourselves, without also, in some sense being obedient to those around us. If we are to know ourselves truly, then we must also seek to know others –whoever they are—as truly as we know ourselves. Obedience to the Word of God neither allows us to bomb abortion clinics with impunity, nor allow us to demonize an entire religion under the guise and dignity of a ‘congressional hearing.’ Obedience, as a virtue, must be a consequence of our Lenten observances seen in the gift of our being able to live more connectedly with our environment and with others, more bravely, more freely and more generously. Those are the fruits of the Spirit, the fruits of our Christian practices and the fruits of real and godly obedience. This obedience, the obedience of Christ, is true obedience and is itself a gift of Love from the One who made us for Love.

In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...