

March 1, 2009

The First Sunday in Lent, Year B

Mark 1:9-15

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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DESIRE

We have today asked deliverance from such things as evil and wickedness, pride and vainglory and from all inordinate and sinful affections. We have asked deliverance, among other things, from destructive *desires*. Perhaps these are the wild beasts of the wilderness, and the things that we are to confront during the wilderness season of Lent. We take on disciplines of fasting and prayer and almsgiving to open us more fully to God and to invite God's transforming grace that we may amend our lives and be more fully the people we were created to be. If we imagine Jesus in the wilderness at all, the chances are that we imagine him as a rather solitary soul battling with Satan, struggling for integrity, confronting inner demons, human appetites and the like. Certainly that is one picture and the story that may be told by my favorite of our Tiffany windows behind you and to your left.

This picture grows from, and gives rise to, what some have called 'the romantic lie'¹. The lie is the idea that we are autonomous human beings capable of free choices independent or largely independent of the influence of those around us. The lie is that desire is an individual matter and so the confronting of desires is something we do all alone in the wilderness.

The truth is rather different from the romantic lie. The truth is that our desires are formed as a social matter. One of the side effects of marriage in my life is that I have been introduced to matters cultural that otherwise might have eluded me. Hence my introduction to the movie from a book about the fashion industry called *The Devil Wears Prada*. The main character is played by Meryl Streep in the film and there is a marvelous, if minor, scene in which she tears a strip off the young college graduate who is serving as her assistant. The young woman has found some attention to what she judged a minor detail of color to be ridiculous. Streep goes into a tirade, chastising this woman for thinking she is so superior and then telling her the chain of events that led to choose to wear a blue sweater of a particular shade. She told how this chain of events was initiated by the fashion industry and spread through a kind of imitative desire that teaches us what it is that we think we like and want. At least one of the ways in which we

¹ Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004) p.19

learn what we like and what we want is through imitation. We want what it appears attractive that we *should* want. None of us really think that we are motivated to “keep up with the Joneses,” but that is in fact how much of our desire gets shaped, isn’t it? I think you look pretty good in those trousers and I think you seem pretty relaxed and on top of your life so think I’d like some of those trousers myself. This is not a rational process (clearly!). It is why some of us gravitate toward blue blazers and khaki trousers and others to baggy jeans that seem to hang just above the knees and others to the fashion of body piercing and tattoos. These are all *communal* uniforms in a sense.

Christian tradition has long recognized that desires are shaped and often perverted as a communal matter. You have probably heard of St. Augustine and his type of biography called *Confessions*. Early on he tells of joining a gang and participating in stealing pears from an orchard. He would never have done it alone, he tells us. His desire was not, as we might suppose, for forbidden and succulent fruit. Rather his desire was for a sense of belonging to the gang. This was something else which he judged to be passing and false. It took him a while to confess his true desire and pray to God: “my desire is for you.”²

The good news is that as surely as our desires are formed communally, so our tastes can change and our confronting destructive desires is a communal matter of sorts as well. This communal shaping of tastes does not let us off the hook for our individual sins. It rather means that we do not need to imagine that we confront them alone.

I remember the first time I tasted skim milk I found it disgusting. I could just about stand 2%. But at some point I switched to skim more often and now find that whole milk tastes almost as rich as cream to me and is too much for cereal or tea in the mornings. We can all think of how our tastes have changed and so our desires have been reshaped. It is just as possible to set aside those habitual and destructive desires that are at the root of sin. But we do not have to do it alone. What you do not see in our Tiffany window are the angels who waited on Jesus in the wilderness. So if we are fasting or forgoing something that we think we need or desire in order to open ourselves to the reordering of those desires to be in accord with the purposes of God, then we would do well to look for angels while we confront the wild beasts. If desire is in some sense imitative, then where do we find those people and qualities that are closer to our truest desires?

And the answer is here -- here around the Table of the Lord, amongst the People of God. It is here that we hear the story of a man of absolute integrity who opens up the possibility of a radically new and renewed creation, a new creation that includes every one of us. It is here that we have some chance of meeting people who are on the journey toward living in ways other than those constructed

² Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991) p.34

for us by desires not for pears or even for the comfort of belonging, but desire for what really matters, desire for love itself.

This past Friday we buried a long time parishioner, Rite Phillips, known to many of you. She was a woman who took some hard knocks in her life and who lived hard through it, albeit with great gusto. But she kept on coming back here -- even with gaps away that could last for years. And this place mattered to her because it was where she got her head right and where she was fed with courage to win the next battle, to overcome the last disappointment, to fight the good fight and to let the angels minister to her through it all. She found not only a community, but a community of angels, a community of faith. This is a community that we can trust to shape our desires and to keep refining that shaping until we reach our truest and deepest desires -- the ones that not only make us happy, but bring joy to everyone.

In prayer I suggest that you consider what it is that you really want for your life this week, remembering that true abundance for you is abundance for all. This suggestion is not an invitation for us to be selfish, but more an invitation to discover our deepest desires and so the person we were created to be. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...