



The Devil Loves Binary

TEXT
Matthew 4:1-11

March 8, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

What does Satan mean, *if?* Is Satan trying to cause self-doubt in Jesus? That question comes to my mind because that would totally work on me. Ask a question like that and every self-doubt demon you can imagine comes to the surface for me. I have an eternal internal second-guesser. Is Satan trying to erode Jesus’ self-confidence? Sowing seeds of doubt, maybe I’m not the Son of God? Maybe God doesn’t claim people like me.

If I understand the text, interpreting this as an assault on Jesus’ self-esteem misses the point. Satan is not trying to challenge Jesus’ identity. The temptation for Jesus, and for you and me, is not to question whether we are God’s children. The tempter wants us to own that we are God’s children, but to live as if we don’t belong to God. Temptation is not an attack on our identity, but on our behavior.

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” OK, but what’s wrong with bread — particularly if you haven’t eaten in 40 days? I was listening to someone who is giving up coffee for Lent. She was grumbling about it. We had

only been in Lent six days, and she was already grumbling. I get it; giving up things is not easy. That’s why this Lent, I have chosen to give up skydiving — oh, and running with the bulls. Not doing either of those for Lent. Some people give up sweets or something: Jesus gave up food. So, after 40 days with no food, a little bread is not a bad thing. If you are famished and you have the power to turn a rock into a Rubeen, what’s wrong with that?

You may not have noticed, but I have already stumbled on this temptation. I have stumbled because I have already tried to figure out why this is not bad, but actually a good thing. We do this all the time. You see, we are seldom tempted to do something that we think is bad. I don’t know many folks who do bad things. What we do is rationalize why whatever it is we want to do is not that bad, but is actually a good thing.

This weekend we welcomed our Meneilly Visiting Scholars., Drs. Margaret Aymer and Carolyn Helsel, of Austin Seminary. Dr. Helsel walked us through the history of Christians who justified the practice of slavery. They looked at arguably the most significant sin of this country

and found ways to say this is all good with God. It is amazing the biblical and theological arguments we make when we want to do something harmful to our neighbor, and we want to be sure Jesus is on our side.

Oh, don’t let me confuse. I’m not suggesting that we would justify slavery. But I don’t think we are categorically different from our ancestors who did. Like them, we can be blind, sometimes intentionally so, to the neighbor we are supposed to love, and we construct our own justifications for passing by on the other side. When Christian faith calls into question our power or status or wealth, and we want to keep those things — because who doesn’t want to keep all those things — well, we can get creative on redefining the wrong thing as the right thing. That’s temptation.

But there is more here. “Command these stones to become bread.” It’s not bad, it’s just small. Jesus will break bread and feed people all the time, including 5,000 at once. What Satan is doing is trying to take Jesus’ focus to feed the world and redirect him to focus on himself. *Forget the world, Jesus. Pay attention to your own hunger. It’s not bad; it’s just too small.*

The same is true with the other temptations. And each time Jesus is faced with temptation, he reaches back into the book of Deuteronomy and recites a verse. He remembers verses he probably learned at Vacation Bible School and memorized as a kid.

I never noticed this before, not until coming to this text again this time around. Jesus recites these verses — not primarily to answer the temptation, but rather to reveal the weakness, the flaw, even the evil of the temptation.

Here's the problem. The temptation describes being a child of God, the Son of God, in a binary fashion. If you are the Son of God, command these stones, throw yourself down, fall down and worship. That's your only option, because this is what a child of God does. It's cut and dried. So, if you don't do these things, you must not be the Son of God. It's a binary conversation: It's either or, this or that, no negotiating, no nuance. It's binary — and Satan loves binary.

Why? Because it distorts the complicated realities of life together by making them appear to be simple, yes or no, in or out, us or them, good or bad.

Have you ever been in one of those group mixers or conversations when you are given forced-choice questions? You know, choose: Are you a night owl or an early bird? Well, that might be easy to answer. Do you prefer Mozart or Motown? What if you like both? Well, that's just too bad; you have to choose one or the other. Are you more like

an antelope or an aardvark? Can I choose sloth? No. Are you more like bacon or scrambled eggs? That's when I stop playing the game. You see, some things can work either/or, Door Number 1 or Door Number 2. But life together doesn't work that way.

So, Jesus responds to temptation by rejecting the binary construct. He refuses to accept either/or, and that is what frees him from temptation. "Command these stones to become bread." Satan, you don't know our deepest hunger. You don't know what makes us not only exist, but really live the word of God.

There are at least two dangers, it seems to me, in talking about life in binary constructs. The first: It enslaves us to a false understanding of life because it pretends that truth is simplistic and always clear. And second, binary construction will almost always create distance with neighbors.

We are in an election year, so we will be flooded with binary language. Every issue will be presented in black and white, either/or terms. It's either the government takes care of everything, or the market takes care of everything. Choose Door Number 1 or Door Number 2, and they are as different as good and evil. Our side is righteous, and the other side is un-American, maybe even evil.

And it is likely to draw us in — at least tempt us. That simplistic narrative is seductive. It makes issues seem so clear. It makes life seem more manageable. And we want our side to

have the answers to the things that keep us awake at night.

But it doesn't stop there. Too often this partisan-binary talk defines the way we talk with one another. The larger cultural conversation sets the context for the way we talk with one another. The problem is most often the partisan talk is deceptive.

We live in a complicated world that actually demands that we embrace nuance, sometimes claims middle ground, sometimes acknowledges mystery and even paradox. Life together is complicated and binary construction. If you are you, you must do this ... almost always fails us.

Now not everything has to be complicated. My son lives in New York City and works sometimes at Café Grumpy in Grand Central Station. It's a coffee shop, and he has become quite the barista — which means when he comes home, he brings us good coffee, and he can tell you about it. He gave us some for Christmas. He said the coffee has tea-like acidity, stone fruit sweetness and a hint of blueberry, with nutmeg and leather on the nose. Really?

I took a sip, and he said, "What do you think?"

I said, "It's good." I missed the stone fruit sweetness and nutmeg, I'll admit. I'm kinda binary with my coffee. It's either good or not.

That's OK with coffee, but it's not OK when we talk about relationships or community — because life together is always complicated. Jesus rejects these temptations. He responds not with certainty and simple an-

swers, but with depth and nuance and conviction. Like Jesus, we are always being tempted. We are tempted to treat relationships too simplistically. And when we do, it does damage to the neighbor.

Marc Dunkelman, in his book *The Vanishing Neighbor*, observes more and more that we think of our neighbors not as those who live on our street or in our neighborhood, but increasingly as those we connect with through technology. Those connections are different. We are choosing, many of us, to connect with people who are like us. Knitters are able to find a community of folks online who love to knit. Or bike riders find other bikers. Or shared political views are found online. Dunkelman argues that as we increasingly connect with folks with whom we find agreement, it gives us the impression that the reasonable world thinks like we do.

When we don't connect with people of other social circumstances, other political views, other worldviews, Dunkelman suggests that "we have less confidence in the average goodwill of the stranger."¹ When I build a network of folks who act and talk and think like I do, I assume that all reasonable people are like me. So if you are not like me, I have to wonder, what's wrong with you. Binary narratives like that destroy community.

From 2011 to 2019, Pam Bondi served as the Attorney General for the State of Florida. In that position, she took some very conservative political positions. Some folks on the left took

issue with her. It was reported recently that she was going to a movie in Tampa and was met by liberal protestors. They did not challenge her policies; they attacked her as a person. They yelled at her. They called her a "horrible person." They attempted to block her entrance to the theater. It was ugly, but they were proud enough of themselves that they filmed their assault.

The irony is that all of this happened as she was attempting to see the movie *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* the documentary about Fred Rogers.²

The partisan, binary nature of American civic conversation surrounds us. And it feeds this lack of civility. It is not just the behavior of protestors from the left. It is the chosen daily genre of our current President to publicly belittle anyone he sees as an opponent, even if they are on his own staff. It is the tone of talk radio and many news channels.

We cannot afford to be naïve about the destructive power it brings to community. This binary narrative is not different enough from our ancestors who told themselves that God had made slaves inferior.

We have work to do. It's not enough to simply be on the right side of an issue; we have to be righteous too — which means a practice of civility, kindness and a big dose of humility are needed, for these are the powers that hold us together when life is complicated.

Fred Rogers (I find it interesting that we are interested in him these days) was not a partisan man, but he was very political . . .

in this sense. Like Jesus, he was very concerned with how we are with one another. That's being "political" in the purest and most faithful sense of the word: to be concerned with how we are with one another.

He believed that we can be and should be neighbors first. "Neighbor" was his word. You know where he got that? Like Jesus, Fred Rogers reached back into scripture to find a verse he probably learned at Vacation Bible School: "Love your neighbor as yourself." He used that verse to guide him in days of complication and deep temptation.

Now I haven't used the word "freedom" today. But I trust that you can see, when we accept a false description of one another, we can't be free.

If you are a child of God — and you are — then don't settle for simplistic narratives of how we must be with one another, for binary constructs will enslave us to destructive behaviors toward one another. And if there is a devil, that is exactly what he would want.

¹Marc Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor* (2014), p. 135

²"What Would Mister Rogers Do?" by Tom Junod, *The Atlantic* (December 2019)

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.