

It was one of the rare times I was silent, I was so stunned – not surprised – stunned by what I had just heard. On the other hand, my husband, normally the quiet one who has to do a lot of thinking before he responds, had a lot to say. I'll never forget that dinner table conversation, that innocently started when we asked my husband's daughter what she had learned in school that day.

*Important point of clarification:* we were not living here in Athens at the time. We were living somewhere else, so this is not a critique nor commentary on the local school. This sermon is not a critique on any school, teacher, or educational system. It's about tests and being tested.

My stepdaughter's answer to the question, what stunned and shocked my husband and me, was that she said she had learned about "the economic benefits of slavery." My husband and I were educated in very different school districts: he in the comfortable suburbs of Milwaukee, me in a small town in rural Wisconsin. Yet we were both taught in school and from our families that slavery has no benefits economic or otherwise because the practice itself is immoral, unethical, and unjust. It caused and continues to cause harm to people and to our country economically, spiritually, socially, and politically. And my husband did not hesitate to tell his daughter this.

It took me a while to process what she had said. *Again, the point of this sermon is not to critique the school systems, so please don't be distracted by that part of my experience. This is a sermon about tests.* I told my stepdaughter that some places teach about slavery, racism, and race very differently, perspectives her father and I not only disagree with but could never condone because of what we believe as followers of Jesus and our baptismal vow to respect the dignity of every human being. I told her all education comes through certain societal lenses, that's why it's important to try and learn from other perspectives, not just what is taught in school. I also told her when it comes time to take the test, there would be more answers she could give than the one the teacher was looking for. If she chose to give the answer her father gave, it could mean she'd fail that test, but we would be as proud of her as if she got an A because she would have passed a very different kind of test.

That is the kind of test Jesus had in the wilderness in today's Gospel, where after his baptism Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit, to a place of no comfort, no food, where the devil was waiting to give him a test. Not the kind of test you are most likely to take in any education system; the devil wasn't trying to see how

well Jesus knew the Bible or history or math or theory. This was a test of character, of what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

The tests, sometimes called temptations, the devil gave Jesus could be seen as shortcuts to power and authority and salvation. Want to solve the problem of hunger? No problem, just magically turn a readily available resource like rocks or stones into bread. Done. Want world peace? No problem, just give your loyalty to the devil and he'll make *you* the all-powerful leader who can tell everyone in the world what to do, think, and believe. Done. Want success? No problem, just call upon the angels to carry you, such a flashy event will make you a celebrity and people to believe you are better than they are and will follow you anywhere. Done. And easy.

These are the shortcuts of magical miracles, authoritarian power, and privilege that disdains the pain and suffering and supposed ordinariness of humanity that have been difficult for humans to avoid since the first man and first woman ate from the tree and then blamed God for their act of distrust. These are the shortcuts that lie to us and try to convince us there are people who are above others because of the color of their skin, gender, wealth, morality, orientation, physical abilities, attractiveness, celebrity, intelligence, education, or public office who don't have to follow rules that are in place for the safety and wellbeing of all people. These are the lies that lead to arrogance, ignorance, and deny the God-given dignity of all human beings. And they are lies that never live up to their promise of making the world a better place without a shared sacrifice.

These are the same lies Jesus faced in his test. I love how Jesus didn't succumb to the additional temptation to argue with the devil. Perhaps going without comforts as he fasted had something to do with his non-anxious response. Perhaps going without food and comfort was his way of showing the devil Jesus wasn't a self-sufficient wilderness survival expert who could save himself and others from the dangers of the world. Far from it. Jesus was showing the kind of Messiah he is through his complete dependence on God, to the point that not even food could distract him from God.

The temptations Jesus faced were the devil's attempts to test who Jesus is loyal to, or who Jesus is in solidarity with. Jesus showed his solidarity, his loyalty, is in every circumstance with God, which also shows us God's solidarity, God's loyalty, in every circumstance is with humanity, especially when we suffer. That means Jesus is the Messiah for whom there is no short cut to life or what we would call "success". For Jesus, life and death is following God through every circumstance, even when exhausted, hungry, uncertain, being persecuted or even killed. There is no shortcut to resurrection life; you only get there the long way around.

We need to mention that sometimes there are people who cause harm, to individuals or whole groups of people, and say they are doing so in the name of Jesus or God. That's why it's important to remember other perspectives. If someone is saying it's God's will to cause harm or suffering so another can feel powerful, privileged, or gain something material at the cost of the other's suffering, then you know it isn't really God's will. Because that is not what Jesus showed. And whoever is trying to cause harm is showing their character, what they are made of, and it isn't the love of God.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness show us Jesus is not the kind of messiah who gave in to short cuts, because they would have cut him off from the more painful or difficult parts of life and humanity. Even when tired or overwhelmed, he always followed the way of the love of God, and through this obedience to God, opened for us the liberating restoration of God's love for all people. The temptations of Jesus can also inspire us to look at tests differently. While there are tests that just want regurgitated information, there are other tests that show us who people are, what and who they care about. There might even be times we will find ourselves tested to give allegiance to things like money or privilege or status, to take the convenient short cut that makes us feel superior even if it causes a harm to others. In those circumstances, it's important to remember there are some tests where passing doesn't translate into a letter grade.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness can also remind us, those short cuts are what contributes to the painful divisions in the world where God desires a restoration, a reconciliation, a return to loving God and each other. Restoration and reconciliation are at the heart of the season of Lent. While it is often the practice of many people to give up some vice for Lent or take on a spiritual discipline, in the early church Lent was a season created to make room for those who wanted to join or return to the Body of Christ, the whole church community. To do so, the entire community prayed and fasted together, acknowledged how they all had fallen short of God's love by confessing their sins, to show solidarity with each other and God as they received and gave forgiveness and turned again, to renew their commitment to God and each other. This is how reconciliation works.

Perhaps this year as Lent begins, we can think about how we can be part of the invitation of reconciliation, to consider what in our lives we need to or are ready to return to, and how we can do so the long way around, through the heart of God and each other.