

February 10, 2008
The First Sunday in Lent
Matthew 4:1-11
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JUST SAY NO

It's one of the first words that children say. I'm not talking about *da-da* or *ma-ma* which rank right up there. I'm talking about that two-letter word: N-o. No! Two year-olds love it. Maybe it starts giving them some independence and some power. "Come on, Joey put on your coat No!" "Honey, eat your peas No!" "You can't watch TV until you pick up your toys ... No!"

"No" is a powerful word. Say it to yourself five times: no, no, no, no, no! Doesn't that feel good?

Many people probably link the word "no" to religion. It's all about that "do not's" and "should not's" and "ought not's" Religion is something stereotyped as being all about saying "no" to the fun things of life. Because if you don't resist temptation there is hell to pay.

And Lent just takes it further. Just say no. For some giving up something for Lent is saying no to the things that lead you from God. Or that make you overweight, get you drunk, or are otherwise not good for you!

Just say no. Remember the so-called "war on drugs" that offered kids ways of saying "no." It later was expanded to violence, premarital sex and other supposed vices that young people might try. The message was simple: when you're tempted, just say no.

There's plenty of temptation in today's readings. Adam and Eve are in the garden of paradise. They are told they can eat the fruit from all the luscious trees in the garden. Except for one. But you know how that goes. As soon as you tell someone what they can't have, that's what they want!

God told Eve and Adam to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would have serious consequences: they would die! As if they had any idea what that meant! But along comes the crafty serpent with a different message: "You don't have to say no. You won't really die. Actually, you'll become like God." And we know what happens after that. They get busted. And everybody blames somebody else. The man blames the woman. The woman blames the snake. The snake could have blamed the fruit on the tree. Someone want to blame God? Why did God put such a scrumptious tree in front of them and tell them they couldn't eat it?

Over fifteen years ago a group in the church I was serving read the book *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*. The author, Gerald May, finds the basics of addiction and grace in this story: willfulness, desire, temptation, attachment, and of course, the fall. He suggests that each of our addictions reenacts Eve and Adam's story. Love is the deep desire of our hearts: to love and be loved. Free will is given that we may choose freely to love God and one another. Yet addiction uses up our desire. It sucks our life energy into obsessions and compulsions, leaving less energy for other people and other pursuits. Addiction is idolatry. Instead of love we give our time, attention and even worship to things that ultimately can't satisfy.

Even if you don't say it that way, it makes you wonder about our society's addiction to substances, to power, to entertainment, to work, to food, to sex, to name only a few. Many of those things are not bad in themselves. And yet we become obsessed with them. We use them to fill up that empty space within. They help us to numb the pain and to avoid the deep truths about ourselves and the painful realities of the world or own lives. Just say no. Don't you wish it were that simple?

The spiritual path is hard work. It takes discipline, intention, openness. Yet many of us choose the road most taken: avoidance. Or as W.H. Auden wrote in "The Age of Anxiety,"

*We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.*

Many people see Lent as Plan B for failed New Year's resolutions. But Jesus didn't venture into the wilderness with a forty-day plan to lose weight, cut down on caffeine, or to stop smoking. In the wilderness he faced hunger, wild beasts, and the devil himself. First he was tempted to turn stone into bread—fast food. A temptation of convenience. Feed the world and be the hero. But he said no. The second temptation: a power trip. Worship Satan in exchange for rule over all the kingdoms of the world. But Jesus said no. The third temptation: jump off the highest pinnacle of the temple and be saved. A little magic, entertainment and the glitz of big time religion. But again Jesus said no.

When adults are baptized, when parents make a profession of faith at the baptism of their child, or when we reaffirm our baptismal promises, we say no. Do you renounce the devil and the forces that defy God. *I renounce them!* Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God? *I renounce them!* Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God? *I renounce them!*

Because God says “yes” to us ... because we are created in the divine image, deeply loved and cherished... because we are marked with the cross of Christ and know that even in our sufferings we are not alone... because of God's promises to us, we can say no. No to injustice. No to discrimination. No to violence. No to political dominance and power. No to evil. No to anything that harms one of God's little ones.

In our busy and stressful lives there is particular good news in just saying no. We are tempted to fill every minute for fear that in our empty moments we will be haunted by things we'd rather not face. For many today, the temptation is to work night and day to prove that we are of worth. Maybe we think it gives us a sense of control, but often the gadgets of technology control us and keep us from the deeper truths, from the people and places that can truly fill our empty hearts. Maybe Lent is about unwinding a bit, slowing down, resting in the “yes” of God's mercy and grace.

So in the sparseness of winter and the simplicity of Lent, let us gather around the gifts of God that fill the empty spaces. And make us grateful for the gift of life itself and give purpose for our days. Let the food and drink of this table give you strength for the journey ahead. For the growth that comes through struggle. For all the challenge and celebration yet to come ... at Easter.