

Eat My Dust
Matthew 4: 1-11

One of our neighbors in our new place in Tewksbury is a lovely older woman with the old-fashioned name of Nell. Nell is a gracious lady, a gentlewoman. Before we moved there she hosted a Sunday afternoon tea for us to which she had formally invited about twenty people. Everything was elegant: perfectly rolled and cut tea sandwiches, delicious pastries, someone pouring tea and coffee at the dining room table. Very nice indeed.

Several weeks ago Nell and her husband left for a driving trip to Florida, planning to stop along the way in North Carolina and Georgia to see old friends. We were talking with Paul before they left about different states' driving laws and speed limits and so on, and he mentioned that he was always careful in his driving.

“But Nell,” he said. “That’s a different story. She drives fast. ‘Eat my dust,’ that’s her motto.”

“Eat my dust!”? I didn’t think she even drove the car! Eat my dust? Obviously there’s a lot more to know about Nell than we have seen so far!

That’s the first idea in the sermon today: **Situations and people are not always what they seem to be.**

Take the Holy Spirit, for example, in today’s reading. Matthew 4, Verses 1 and 2: *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*

Why would the Holy Spirit do such a thing? Why would the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, lead Jesus into temptation? Why would the Holy

Spirit cause Jesus to suffer from hunger and thirst? Why would the Holy Spirit seem to act in a way contrary to being an agent of God's blessing?

Hold those questions for a moment while we review what happens there in the desert. Jesus is tempted three times by the devil: tempted to turn stones into bread, tempted to jump from a high wall and be rescued by angels; tempted to rule all the kingdoms of the world. And every time Jesus resists the temptation. Jesus in effect says to the devil, "Eat my dust!"

How does he do it? Through the power of the Holy Spirit. The very same Holy Spirit that put Jesus into the situation to begin with empowers him to come through it, countering the devil's recitation of Scripture with his own:

- *'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*
- *'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*
- *'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'*

So the second idea, and the response to the question of how the Holy Spirit could allow Jesus to suffer bedevilment, is this: **the Holy Spirit empowers us to resist temptation and to come through suffering.** We can even begin to realize that there is some higher purpose to it all: recognizing that life is not about food or other material goods; accepting that God's idea of abundance and our concept of abundance may be measured differently; trusting that the holy spirit in us will still be strong even when we go without what we like to think are essentials.

It is not in our human nature to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. The story from Genesis – Adam and Eve not able to resist the alluring words of the serpent, not able to resist their curiosity and their desire to have the

knowledge of good and evil and so be in control, like God – that story describes each one of us.

But Jesus reverses history. In Romans, Paul calls Jesus the second Adam. He writes: *Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.*

We are still caught, though, in the struggle of being inherently like Adam and Eve and yet striving to be like Jesus. How difficult it is - when we are down, hungry, thirsty, tired, anxious, sick, afraid, lonely – how difficult it is to feel energized by the Spirit, to rev up the engine and move ahead, shouting, “Devil, eat my dust!”

We have a woman in our congregation who has lived alone for some time. Because she needs to stay attached to oxygen, she doesn't like to go out very much – too much trouble hauling that around tank around. Her grandson helps her with shopping and so on, but she admits to being quite lonely. Television goes just so far in keeping you company.

Shirley just recently learned that she has breast cancer and will be facing surgery. I think she might go so far to say that this is one of the best things that's happened to her. Her family and friends have rallied around. Her granddaughter has taking her to some of the pre-op appointments and the two of them have been having some great conversations. When her surgery is scheduled, her daughter will come from Illinois to care for her. Shirley beamed with joy when she told me that. Having to make all these doctor visits, she's been seeing that the oxygen tank is not so cumbersome after all. I hope she'll be here in church more after this. I'm sure that someone would be glad to bring her.

Now to be sure, Shirley is not looking forward to the surgery. But it seems that other more important things are taking place that ease her worry and anxiety. And she is looking beyond these coming days of trouble to living the rest of her life with a brighter, more free spirit. The Holy Spirit is energizing her and I can almost hear her mutter, “Cancer, eat my dust!”

Parker Palmer writes:

What God requires of those who call on God’s name is responsive servanthood. God wishes to act in and through us, so Christian hope does not relieve men and women of responsibility. We are not primarily responsible [though] for shrewd analysis of problems, for strategic selection of means, for maximizing the chances of success. We are primarily responsible for turning to God, for attempting to know and do God’s will. That may well lead us into actions which are not shrewd, strategic, or successful, as the life of Jesus suggests. But as Jesus’ life demonstrates, human action which is faithful to God’s will can have a transforming effect.

Transformation happens – situations are not what they might appear to be - when we let the power of the Holy Spirit overtake our human tendency to give in and give up. And God through Jesus Christ is able to far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine.

Palmer, Parker. *Company of Strangers*. Quoted in *Behold: Arts for the Church Year. Lent & Easter, February 6 - May 11*. Inver Grove Heights: Logos, 2008.

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