

## **Sermon for February 21, 2010**

### **The Rev John A. Baldwin**

Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity was a millionaire by the age of 29. As such, he could buy his wife "everything" he thought she could possibly desire. But one day he came home to discover that she had left him. He went after her and caught up with her on a Saturday night in a New York City hotel. They talked into the small hours of the morning as she poured out her heart. She confessed that her spirit was burned out. She wasn't interested in the things he was buying her. She was dead inside and wanted to live again. Together they made a radical decision. They would sell everything they had and dedicate themselves to serving poor people, and to working for justice for the oppressed.

The next day being Sunday, they found a church and went there to worship and thank God for their new beginning. They got to the church early, hunted up the minister, and told him about the decision they had made. To their surprise, the minister told them that such a radical decision (to give up everything) wasn't really necessary. "He just didn't understand" Millard later said, "that we weren't giving up money and the things money could buy. We were giving up a whole way of life that was killing us." 1.

Flash back 2000 years.....to a desolate landscape not far from the Jordan River. Jesus of Nazareth is alone and deep in thought. He has just been baptized by John the Baptist, and heard the voice of God proclaiming him "God's Beloved Son". What does it all mean? What's the next leg of Jesus' spiritual journey?

Then Satan comes calling, introducing Jesus to some juicy temptations. Focus your energy on feeding the poor; one splashy media event - that's all you need to convince people of your special status; political power... that's the ticket to the Kingdom of God. Beneath these 3 temptations is a 4th, one that is hidden and very subtle. It lies in a 2 letter word...IF. "If you are the son of God, command these stones"...."If you are the son of God, throw yourself down". Satan deviously tries to plant seeds of Doubt. Satan's goal is to undermine Jesus' assurance and self-confidence. He challenges Jesus to prove himself.

Perhaps you can hear echoes from your own childhood. "If you're so smart, then...." "If you're so brave, then.... Although you may have been feeling smart or brave, these challenges often tempt you into doing something that is not smart or brave at all. It takes a certain amount of moral courage to have the strength to say to those who would undermine our gifts and strengths, "I don't need to prove anything to you at all."

Jesus' victory over Satan in the Wilderness is two-fold. He refuses to rise to the bait; and he gets clear in his own mind the course his ministry is going to take, despite the cacophony of noise and distraction Satan attempts to put in his way.

In our modern day story, Millard Fuller and his wife heard these same sorts of words from the well-meaning minister in New York City. "It's not necessary for you to give up everything." Many others might have jumped on those words to lessen the pain of giving up a comfortable lifestyle, "To eat your cake and have it too." But the Fullers saw in those words the whisperings of the adversary in the Wilderness. To that spiritual foe, they spoke back: "We are not giving up money, we are giving up a whole way of life that is killing us."

One of the greatest stumbling blocks along the road to spiritual maturity and wholeness... to life in its fullness and depth.... is to imagine that Satan's power lies primarily in the allurements of evil. That may well be tempting enough for those with moor moral boundaries, but for those who see ourselves as basically "nice", moral, decent men and women, that temptation is relatively easy to resist. Far more difficult is to resist those subtle challenges to our esteem and self-worth; to stay focused on choices and priorities that are life-giving rather than life-depleting; to value the spiritual life as critical to our well-being, rather than as one more "life-style" choice.

That which seeks to draw us away from the love and grace of God is focused on sowing seeds of doubt, hesitancy, qualified adherence, spiritual laziness. It tries to convince us that the journey of discipleship is an easy one.... "It's not necessary for you to give up everything." It encourages the notion of cheap grace, warm fuzzies, & shallow theology.

The season of Lent is a corrective spiritual action for those who pay attention to the state of their souls. Lent reminds us of our need for forgiveness, renewal and spiritual discipline. If you were one of those who observed Ash Wednesday a few days ago, and if you were listening closely to the Litany of Penitence on p. 267 of the Prayer Book, you would have heard a few familiar things, reminders of ways we have fallen short of the life of grace. Listen to some of the things for which we asked forgiveness and consider whether you, nice person that you are, might not be guilty of one or more of the following: "We have not forgiven others ....been deaf to God's call to serve....indulged our appetites.... envied those more fortunate than ourselves.... been neglectful in prayer and worship.... expressed false judgments and uncharitable thoughts towards our neighbors....polluted God's creation....turned in indifference from injustice and cruelty....been lacking in concern for those who come after us expressed impatience with our lives.

The purpose of this Litany, the Confession of Sin or the penitential character of Holy Eucharist, Rite 1, is not to inflame feelings of shame, but to beckon us towards a renewal of life.

The difference between conviction by the Holy Spirit and condemnation by the devil is that the devil will remind you of things which you have already confessed and been forgiven for, and deceive you into accepting guilt for them, even though God has declared you forgiven and your sins forgotten. Conviction by the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is the perceiving of guilt, which is designed to move you to repentance and, confession and freedom 2.

I close with a story about a first century rabbinic scholar who would tell his followers, "Repent one day before your death." "But how" they would ask, does anyone know? One might die any day. It could be tomorrow, next week, or next year." "Then repent", he would say again, "one day before your death." 3.

It's this sense of cleansing, renewal, and getting right with God that is at the heart of Lent....in Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness... and in the beckoning of people like the Millard Fullers away from allegiance to the pursuit of wealth and power, to the freedom of life in service to others. Amen.

1. from Tony Campolo, Wake Up America, Nashville: Harper Collins, 1991, p. 104
2. from a talk by Michael Flynn at the Leadership Development Institute, Evergreen, Colorado, January 1990.
3. Paul Wharton, Stories and Parables for Preachers and Teachers.