

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
February 21, 2010
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WHERE HAS TRUST GONE?

Recently I read somewhere that historians and political scientists have noticed an interesting and disturbing phenomenon. For several decades now there has been an ever growing emphasis on transparency, especially in government. But, it has spread to every institution and even to the way we relate to other persons. The assumption is that the more we know about something the better we will be able to trust it. So, our media have been relentless in seeking to pull back the covers on everything. Authenticity seems to require that individuals divulge as much about themselves as they can—hence, facebooking, blogging, and even reality TV shows. Our appetite for knowing as much as we can about our politicians and celebrities, about our friends and acquaintances seems to be almost insatiable.

The irony is that instead of creating closer bonds between us and our friends, between us and our government, our schools, our churches, the exact opposite has happened. The more we know about things, the less we trust them. Our trust level for government and other major institutions is now at an all time low.

Why? The theory is that none of lives bears that kind of scrutiny. Our friends and the people who run our institutions are the same fallible human beings that you and I are. Clay feet abound! Our quest to know everything has reduced everyone to our own level. Frankly, I'm not sure that any of us are comfortable with the thought of people just like us running the country. Perhaps, it has always been that way; we just didn't know that much about them. I suppose it is like when we have folks over for dinner. They don't see all of the mess that we went through to get things ready. That's why most folks don't appreciate unexpected drop in visits. The only people whom we allow to see things as they normally exit are our family and close friends—people we can trust to accept us as we really are. A major part of life is learning exactly whom we can give such trust.

Our gospel story, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness—always the lesson for the First Sunday of Lent—is a story about whom we can trust. At Jesus' baptism it was revealed to him that he is God's beloved Son. Then we are told that the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness where he stayed for forty days and nights. The wilderness in the Bible is associated with a time and place when you are forced to figure out who you are, who God is, and how those two realities fit together.

So, Jesus spent forty days fasting and contemplating what in the world does it mean for God to designate him as God's beloved Son. At the end of that time suddenly the Devil appears. The Devil often plays the role as the one who tests us as to who we think we are. With Adam and Eve he

proposed that if they would only disregard God's instructions, they would become Godlike. They trusted him, and mighty was their fall. Jesus, on the other hand, did not, because he saw that Satan was subtly proposing a new identity for Jesus that was not what God had in mind.

First, Satan plays on Jesus' hunger by suggesting that he use divine powers to change rocks into bread. Not only could he feed himself, he could put an end to world hunger. Think what power that would give him. But, Jesus did not take the bait. We are not to live by bread alone, but by the very word of God. The Devil then tried a more direct approach. He showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said that they could be Jesus' if he would but fall down and worship Satan. The Jews were desperately looking for a messiah who would have the power to cast out the Romans and anyone else who would oppress them. Just think what Jesus could have accomplished with such power. But, he would have none of it. We are to worship God and God alone. All power belongs to God and must be used at His direction. So, the Devil tried one more temptation—a pretty lame one at that. If you, Jesus, think that God will always exercise His powers for you, let's test it. Jump off the highest point of the Temple for surely God will send His angels to catch you. He could have added, just think of how astonished the people of Jerusalem would be. After that they would believe anything you have to say. Jesus for the third time rejected Satan's attempt to get him to use divine powers for his own sake. We are not to put the Lord to the test. With that the Devil left to wait until a more opportune time would come for further testing.

In these temptations or tests Jesus clarified what it meant to be God's beloved Son, to be the messiah. It didn't include throwing around divine power to astonish people to win their allegiance out of fear. Jesus, thereby, set himself on a long, hard road to win the hearts of people by teaching and demonstrating God's love for them. He would gain their hearts not by being powerful, but in his caring for them and their needs. He would proclaim a realm of God's love, not an empire of God's power—something that was so counter-cultural that only a few really understood.

So, what's the message for us? Is it not that Jesus wants to win our hearts for God? And, should we not expect that Satan will test our own understanding of what it means for us to be called God's beloved sons and daughters? In fact, every day we pray that we not be put to tests that would overwhelm us—those are the temptations being referred to in the Lord's Prayer. Our tests will not be the same as those that Jesus faced. But, they will surely probe our understanding of our relationship to God and where God wants to lead us. One of the purposes of the forty days of Lent is to give us time to get clear about these important matters. Easter will be all about resurrection power, about new life, new possibilities. But, how we prepare ourselves during Lent, the mindset that we bring to Easter, will make a crucial difference on just what kind of Easter people we will be.

Thinking about Lent and Easter here at St. Barnabas, a new era begins in a few weeks. Your new rector will arrive, having heard God's call to come here to be your servant leader. You have been through a very long period of time discerning God's call for this parish. I suspect that you faced your own set of temptations and tests along the way. I know that you are breathing a sigh of relief that this interim period is coming to an end. But, my word to you is that you must remain vigilant. It is exactly right now that Satan can test you again. He can tempt you to think that Renée can turn stones into bread (read, bring in lots of new people and revenue). That she will return St. Barnabas back to its glory days. That she will be so impressive that St. Barnabas will be back on the map. Well, Renée is an impressive person, and God willing St. Barnabas will experience new vitality and growth. But, your new rector is her own person. How you and she will live into the future is a great unknown. What she will be looking for from you is that you give her your hearts. And, of course, you want her to give you her own heart. I read recently that the Latin verb *credo* from which we get the word "creed" comes from two other words being put together: heart and give. When we confess our faith in the words of the Nicene or Apostles' Creed we are in effect giving our hearts to God. We are saying that we fundamentally trust our lives to God's loving care. We do this because of who we know God to be in Jesus. But, we also do it because we experience that loving care here in this place with each other. When Renée arrives, I urge you to open your hearts to her. Trust and believe that God is sending her here that you might have new life and have it abundantly. AMEN.