

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

This story sounds like it came straight out of Mayberry. The local sheriff was looking for a new deputy. His only applicant was not known to be the brightest academically, but the sheriff decided to interview him anyway. He began his questioning of the young man asking, “What is 1 and 1?” “Eleven”, came the reply. The sheriff thought to himself, “That’s not what I meant, but he’s kind of right.” So the sheriff continued, “What two days of the week start with the letter “T””? “Today and tomorrow,” said the applicant. The sheriff was again surprised by the answer. It certainly wasn’t what he had in mind, but not bad. The sheriff then said, “Now, listen carefully, who killed Abraham Lincoln?” The young man thought long and hard and then finally admitted, “I don’t know”. The sheriff said, “Well, my friend, why don’t you go home and work on that one for a while?” The young man left, smiling brightly, and wandered over to his buddies gathered outside. He whooped loudly, “I got the job! The interview went great! First day on the job and I’m already working on a murder case!”

Our Gospel this morning tells us about Jesus’ first days on the job. Matthew tells us that immediately after his Baptism by John in the Jordan River, “...Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry.”

For a moment, let’s focus our attention on this notion of fasting. Fasting in the past made practical sense when food supplies were limited. On any given day, a town’s marketplace had enough food for a day or maybe two. If all were to eat, everyone had to practice restraint. In the springtime especially, when winter stores were depleted but new crops had not matured, fasting was necessary. Springtime hunger was part of the natural order of life, and many concluded thereby that it was God’s will.

Modern technology and global farming practices ensure that those of us living in developed nations have an uninterrupted supply of food. This has obscured an important aspect of fasting. We no longer see ourselves accommodating ourselves to God’s will for the sake of others. In fact, “fasting” can come to serve our own will. We might have good intentions, but we might also see our Lenten fast as a good time to lose those extra pounds we put on over the holidays or get off the couch and get a little more exercise to shape up for the summer’s swimwear. In all this, the deeper meaning of fasting, to follow the will of God, is lost.

That’s exactly what happened in these temptations of Christ. Satan tempts Jesus three times to use his divine gifts to serve himself; and three times Jesus resists by placing himself and his gifts at the service of His Father’s mission. In each temptation Satan is tempting Jesus to take the crown without the cross.

In the first temptation Satan calls on Jesus to turn stone into bread to satisfy his own appetite, but not only his own, but our appetites as well. He wanted Jesus to use his power to buy our affection and devotion. In his reply, Jesus tells Satan, “You don’t get it, do you? Humanity will never be satisfied even if all their needs are met, they will live and prosper as I do by the intimacy of relationship that comes about by hearing and listening to “every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” that speaks of His love for us.”

Don’t we often fall into this Devil’s Trap? We pray asking God to provide what we want or what we need or even what we hope for, and if our needs aren’t met when and how we want, we give up on God and give up on prayer. Jesus is saying in those moments seek God, seek His Love, open your Bible and listen to his Word of Love spoken to you.

Satan then calls on Jesus to fall on the rocks; show his power; gain popularity by performance; gain the crown without the cross. He even uses, or should I say, mis-uses Scripture: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you and with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’”

Doesn’t that just show you that anyone, even the Devil himself, can come up with a Scripture quote to support whatever argument or point of view that you want.

The temptation here is to take the easy way out; take the short-cut; you don’t have to play by the rules; gain the crown without the cross. Isn’t that a temptation all too many of us have had to struggle with at one time or another in our lives.

I love the Lord’s reply to this one. Basically he says, “Don’t play with God. Don’t put God to the test.” And, unfortunately, more than a few of us do play with God. We often put God to the test. We do that when we pray, “Lord, please help me do well in this test,” when we didn’t bother to study for the test; or “Lord, help me to win this race,” when you didn’t work out or practice.

I can’t tell you how many people have told me over the years, “Father, if I hit the lottery or I win big at the casino, all your money problems will be over.” I laugh and say, “Please, just give me whatever money you’re going to play. I would be happy with that.” There is rarely an easy way out of any struggle; there are no short-cuts to solving problems; and there is no crown worth wearing without carrying a cross.

Finally, Satan lowers the boom on Jesus. He says, “Look, God gave me the power of all the kingdoms of the earth. If you want to be seen as great and powerful, I’m the One, bow down and worship me.” Here the Devil shows how stupid he really is. He acknowledges that any power he has comes from God. Jesus finally gives him the boot, “Get away, Satan! Why would I worship you when it is the Lord, my God whom I worship and him alone will I serve.”

This temptation to power is mighty and strong in most of us. Power enters into and distorts too many of our relationships. It begins when we're kids—who's going to be king of the mountain or lord of the sandbox. Even when we're grown we act like kids—who's going to control the remote for the TV. This quest for power insinuates itself into marital relationships and relationships between parents and children. The insidiousness of the lust for power invades not just our politics, but the relationships between nations. It is the work of the Devil in the world that pits people and nations against each other, and all too often it seems he is winning the day. And it would be so if Jesus had chosen the crown without the cross.

For now, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we find ourselves in the wilderness, trying to find our way through. Temptations come and often offer us the wrong answers, the wrong choices—the wrong use of power, the way to popularity, the wrong kind of partnership. These temptations of Christ show us that we can resist as He resisted. He did not turn those stones into bread. He fed himself the Word of God. He did not fling himself upon the rocks. He didn't seek man's approval; rather he sought God's. He did not seek earthly power by rendering service to Satan. He desired far more to obey his Father in heaven.

In these first days on the job, Jesus was tempted to save himself. But, if he had, he would have failed in the work God had given him to do—to save us. Jesus was tempted to take the crown without the cross and he did not.

We too are constantly being tempted to take the crown without the cross. This season of Lent is our journey in the wilderness when we face these temptations by fasting and praying and giving alms, not to become better people, but to give ourselves in obedient service to the God who loves us and who asks us to make real our love for Him in our loving service to one another. That is the Cross Jesus tells us we are to take up daily if we are to be his followers. Please God, may we not settle for a crown without the Cross.