

# First Sunday in Lent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Tomorrow is officially two months away from the tax filling deadline. As this deadline approaches this year, a large number of people will be in shock. No, it won't be a bigger-than-expected refund. No, it won't be a larger-than-expected payment. In fact, they will find that someone else using their identity has already filed their taxes. Sources say that identity theft and tax fraud are on the rise this year.<sup>1</sup>

In today's reading from Luke we see a biblical version of identity theft. Here we find Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days where he was tempted by the devil. In Greek the word translated as "tempted" has a variety of meanings. Sure, tempted is one of those meanings, but it could also be examined or tried. The essence of the word is that Jesus was on trial to prove his identity.

One theologian, Rev. Dr. David Lose, argues that in this wilderness courtroom the specific questions don't really matter. In the reading it's bread first, then power, and finally safety. But, it could be something else. The point of the story "isn't the specific temptations, but rather the underlying nature of temptation itself. In short, ...temptation is not so often temptation *toward* something...but rather [it] is usually the temptation *away* from something."<sup>2</sup> So instead of it temptation towards doing something you shouldn't do, temptation here is about being tempted away from our God given identity.

Ok, if you're not buying it yet, let's look at the reading from Luke a bit more closely. First, Jesus is wicked hungry, and so he's offered bread. Jesus, though, responds with an affirmation of trust in God. The next temptation is a bit more transparent. The devil promises all the power of the world if Jesus worships him. But again, Jesus knows his loyalty is only to God from whom he receives his identity. And finally, the devil tries to indicate that God is not trustworthy, but Jesus denies this ploy as well.

In each moment, "the devil seeks to undermine Jesus' confidence in both God and himself. The devil seeks to erode Jesus's confidence that he is enough, that he is secure, and that he is worthy of God's love." In the midst of these temptations, Jesus quotes the sacred story of Israel in order to assert that he is a part of that story. With that, Jesus reaffirms his identity as a child of God, and Jesus is reminded not only that he has enough and is enough but that he is of infinite worth in the eyes of God.<sup>3</sup>

"Bread, power, and safety. But it just as well might have been youth, beauty, and wealth. Or confidence, fame, and security. On one level, we experience specific temptations very concretely." Yet, on another they are all the same. They seek to shift our allegiance, trust, and confidence away from God and toward some substitute - a substitute that seems to promise a more secure identity.<sup>4</sup>

That is why this passage is really about identity theft. It's not simply the devil's failed attempt to steal Jesus' identity. But rather, it's about the attempts of this world to rob each of us from our identity. After all, we are constantly assaulted with images, advertisements, messages, and people who try to create in us a sense of lack or inadequacy. Even political candidates employ a variety of tactics based on fear and insecurity. "Terrorism, immigrants, corporations, joblessness, low wages, high taxes, the wealth, the poor - depending on which candidate you listen to the target shifts, but the message is the same. The message is that you should be afraid because ... you are not enough."<sup>5</sup>

Yet today's readings argue that you *are* enough. You are enough in Deuteronomy because you are a part of people that has been given the good gifts of the land from our God. So give thanks for these gifts. In the Psalm you're reminded that God will protect you. In Romans you're reminded that no matter who you are - Jew or Greek, black or white, insider or outsider, gay or straight, republican or democrat, socialist or capitalist, married or single,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://floridapolitics.com/archives/201422-tas-season-is-here>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-1-c-identity-theft/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

woman or man, Chicago-native or recent transplant, member of this congregations for decades or here for twenty-minutes – no matter what label you’ve been given, God is generous to you. You *are* enough. You *are* loved.

Love. That is the story of Lent, so in some ways it’s fitting that it’s Valentine’s Day. Sure, we have a more reflective service today. Sure, the baptismal waters of Easter feel a long way off. But this is the first Sunday where we start our journey of love. As Lutherans we embrace the story of love. For God sent “God’s only Son into the world to take on our lot and life, to suffer the same temptations and wants, to be rejected as we often feel rejected, and to die as we will do, all so that we may know God is with us and [God] is for us forever. Moreover, God raised Jesus from the dead in order to demonstrate that God’s love is more powerful than all the [fear] in the world and that the life God offers is more powerful even than death.”<sup>6</sup>

So while temptation, Valentine’s Day, and Lent is an odd assortment, I wonder if it is exactly what we need. Far too often the temptations of the world, the voices around us and in our head, and the lack of time want to deprive us of whom we are, but now is the time to reclaim our identity as God’s children.

One method I’ve found helpful to reclaim my identity is through meditation. For me, meditation and prayer are one-in-the-same. Today I’m going to stop talking now and invite you into a time of meditation. I’m going to guide us through a time together to reconnect with our identity. Today’s form of meditation is called “metta meditation.” It’s based on reciting specific phrases and words to evoke a “boundless warmhearted feeling” of self-awareness. So before we begin, take a moment to find a comfortable position. If children scream don’t get flustered just allow it to be an expression of our identity as God’s beloved children. Alright, find that comfortable place and settle in.

## **A MODIFIED METTA MEDITATION**

The practice of Metta meditation is a beautiful support to other awareness practices. One recites specific words and phrases evoking a "boundless warm-hearted feeling." The strength of this feeling is not limited to or by family, religion, or social class. We begin with our self and gradually extend the wish for well-being happiness to all beings.

### **Brief Instructions**

Sit in a comfortable and relaxed manner. Take two or three deep breaths with slow, long and complete exhalations. Let go of any concerns or preoccupations. For a few minutes, feel or imagine the breath moving through the center of your chest - in the area of your heart.

The “Great Commandment” reminds us to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength [and to] love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31 NRSV). So too, Metta is first practiced toward oneself, since we often have difficulty loving others without first loving ourselves. Sitting quietly, mentally repeat, slowly and steadily, the following or similar phrases:

May I feel loved.	May I be happy.	May I be enough.
May I be well.	May I be safe.	May I be peaceful.

While you say these phrases, allow yourself to sink into the intentions they express. This meditation consists primarily of connecting to the intention of wishing ourselves or others love and happiness. However, if feelings of warmth, friendliness, or love arise in the body or mind, connect to them, allowing them to grow as you repeat the phrases. As an aid to the meditation, you might hold an image of yourself in your mind's eye. This helps reinforce the intentions expressed in the phrases.

After a period of directing the meditation toward yourself, bring to mind a person in your life who has deeply cared for you. Then slowly repeat phrases toward them:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

May you feel loved.      May you be happy.      May you be enough.  
May you be well.      May you be safe.      May you be peaceful.

As you say these phrases, again sink into their intention or heartfelt meaning. And, if any feelings of love and kindness arise, connect the feelings with the phrases so that the feelings may become stronger as you repeat the words.

As you continue the meditation, you can bring to mind other friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers, animals, and finally people with whom you have difficulty. You can either use the same phrases, repeating them again and again, or make up phrases that better represent the loving-kindness you feel toward these beings.

Sometimes during metta meditation, seemingly opposite feelings such as anger, grief, or sadness may arise. Take these to be signs that your heart is softening, revealing what is held there. You can either shift to mindfulness practice or you can—with whatever patience, acceptance, and kindness you can muster for such feelings—direct loving-kindness toward them. Above all, remember that there is no need to judge yourself for having these feelings.

You are loved. Go in peace. God is with you.

*This is a modified version from “Metta Meditation” found at <http://www.mettainstitute.org/mettameditation.html>*