

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent – A

I once had a co-worker who would insist that “everything comes in threes.” She was always very alert to when things showed up in threes (and maybe wasn’t paying attention when they didn’t show up in threes). Well she would be very pleased with today’s homily, because there are a number of threes that show up today.

But before getting to that, let’s take a look at our readings. It’s the first Sunday of Lent, and our first reading takes us back to the beginning and the story of how sin entered into this world. God had created Adam and Eve, and he gave all of creation to them to look after and to enjoy, but there was thing he forbade them to eat: the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, Satan entered into the Garden of Eden and tempted them to eat the one thing that God had told them not to eat. It’s interesting that Satan first speaks to Eve, who in this story of creation was the last

one created by the Lord and so in a sense the pinnacle or the highest point of God's creation. And so Satan went after her first and of course lied to her about the fruit and the consequences of eating it. However, although it doesn't explicitly say this, it sounds like Eve was not alone when Satan tempted her, because, when she took the fruit and ate it, it says, "She also gave some to her husband *who was with her.*" So clearly Satan tempted both of them. And in our second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, St. Paul refers to this sin as "the trespass of Adam."

And here's where the first set of threes shows up in today's homily. The nature of temptation is three-fold. As it says elsewhere in Scripture, in the first letter of St. John, the love of the world – which here means anything that is not of God – has three dimensions: "the lust of the flesh", "the lust of the eyes", and "the pride of life". Similarly, Adam and Eve were tempted by the fruit: it

says in our first reading: “The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom.”

First, “the tree was good for food”: this is the lust of the flesh or physical desire, in this case, the hunger for the forbidden fruit, although desire for physical things can take multiple forms. Second, she saw that it was “pleasing to the eyes” – this is the “lust of the eyes” – this is greed, the desire to always have more, to possess what we don’t have. And finally, it was “desirable for gaining wisdom”: this is the sin of pride, the most fundamental sin of all, because the desire for wisdom was for the purpose of becoming God’s equal, as Satan told her it would make her (which of course was a lie). Lust, greed, pride – I would imagine that all sin pretty much comes down to these three.

With this act of disobedience, sin entered into the world. Adam and Eve did not become God’s equals as Satan had falsely told them; instead, they experienced shame for the first time and were

cast out of Eden. Through this first sin, human nature, which God had created good, became distorted and degraded. We are all part of the human race, and so share in this distortion and degradation of our human nature.

But the Lord did not leave things at that. He did not leave Adam and Eve and the human race to endless degradation and condemnation because of this first sin. God's response to man's first sin was to send his only beloved Son into this world, to assume our human nature, and to redeem it. This is what St. Paul talks about in our second reading when he says: "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so, through the obedience of the one, the many will be made righteous."

What St. Paul is talking about here is that Jesus came for our salvation and our redemption through his death on the cross and his resurrection. And in doing this, Jesus restores our human nature

to its original state of holiness and even elevates it. This is what St. Paul calls the gift of justification. Martin Luther and John Calvin and so on said that justification is more or less like being acquitted in the divine court: that because of Jesus' death on the cross, God changes our sentence from guilty to innocent. But the Catholic understanding of justification is different. We believe that it is more than that – justification means a change in our very nature, that God restores and transforms our human nature. The distortion of our human nature that began with Adam and Eve is undone by Jesus Christ. If you understand that, other doctrines like purgatory start to make sense.

And while it is Jesus Christ who justifies us, we can and should cooperate in that transformation of our nature. What we do is nothing in comparison to what Jesus has done for us, but in his goodness he allows to participate in the work he does in us. And what we do is also a sign that Jesus is working in us. And how do we

participate in this work? Primarily through the three Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – another three – which of course are not just for Lent but which we should try to pay extra attention to during Lent.

Finally, turning to our Gospel reading, we hear how Jesus went into the desert to fast and pray for 40 days in anticipation of and preparation for his public ministry. And it's from this of course that we derive our 40 days of Lent. And we hear how Satan came to tempt Jesus himself, who was a human like us in all things but sin. The devil tempts the Lord in the same three-fold way: through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – again, lust, greed, and pride. Because Jesus has been fasting, he of course is very hungry. And so the devil tries to tempt him to change stones into bread, to break his fast. This is the lust of the flesh, the temptation to give in to physical desires. He tries to get Jesus to throw himself down from the highest point of the temple in

Jerusalem, saying that angels will prevent him from hurting himself – this is temptation to the sin of pride, to perform a spectacular stunt in front of all the people gathered at the temple. And finally, he tempts Jesus with the promise of giving him all the kingdoms of the world – with one catch, that Jesus worship him. This is the lust of the eyes, or the temptation to possess earthly things.

And with this final temptation, Jesus sends Satan away. Jesus came not to satisfy human physical cravings but to suffer and die for us. He did not come to receive empty human praise and adulation akin to what we give to celebrities, because really God has no need of our praise – rather, being able to praise God is his gift to us. God is not changed in any way by our praise; rather, it is we who are changed when we praise him. And when Jesus was born into this world, he humbled himself by becoming man. Finally, Jesus has no need of created things – he does not need any or all of the kingdoms of the world, because he is the world's creator and all of creation

already belongs to him. And when he died on the cross, he was stripped of everything, and he gave everything for us, including his very life.

God's response to the sin of our first parents was not to condemn them and the rest of the human race, but rather to restore us to being in right relationship with him. He came to restore our human nature, which is so damaged, distorted, and degraded by sin – to restore it to its original holiness and even to elevate it. Satan told Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit, she would become like God. But the devil is a liar and what happened is that humanity ended up degraded, and suffering entered into the world. But God sent his Son in response, so that we might truly become like God – not equal to God, but holy like him.

As we go through this Lenten season, let us ask God for his grace and strive to cooperate with it through the three penitential

works of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, so that the Lord might transform us and make us more and more like himself.

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