

“Love’s Labor”

February 21, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

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We enter the season of Lent standing on a precipice with Jesus. After his baptism, after being affirmed as God’s own beloved, he finds himself in the desert being tempted. After 40 days of fasting he is weak from hunger, and that’s when the temptations come fast and hard.

We aren’t told much about those forty days except that Jesus endured them. But I can’t help wonder how he endured them. He surely didn’t just steel himself to the voices of temptation. I don’t see how he could have sat rigid and tense that whole time. I’ve tried fasting for just a day and I’ve found it’s much harder to do if I put a lot of effort into it, if I do it out of a sense of duty.

I don’t think Jesus went to the desert for some grim exercise of spiritual struggle. He had just been called God’s beloved. So maybe he went to the desert to learn how to love. Turns out, loving is hard work. When we love we’re always tempted to look the other way, tempted to find fulfillment in other pursuits, other people.

Keeping our focus on the object of our love can be exhausting. So Jesus worked at focusing his attention on God, which is why we fast. Fasting is a way of shutting out every other distraction. It’s how a person can let go of all the concerns that occupy our minds most of the time.

What are some of the things that occupy your mind? What are some of the distractions that keep you from focusing on your love for God? Maybe it’s your work or your family. It could be your desire for security or for wealth or for status. Maybe you’re concerned for your health or for the health of someone close to you. Now none of those things is bad; no one would fault us for being distracted by them. Yet any of them has the power to take over our thoughts and cut us off from love for God.

These forty days of Lent are intended to help us join Jesus in the desert and learn how to love God. But where do we begin? So often we think of Lent as a time to give up something we really like. And so our time during the season can end up being spent distracted over missing what we’re denying ourselves. It can even leave us feeling a little resentful toward God. That may not be the best way to learn how to love God.

Maybe it makes more sense to add something to our lives during Lent instead of taking something away. Maybe Lent is a time to commit ourselves to meditative prayer every day. Some of you probably spend 20 minutes or so a day exercising as a way of conditioning your bodies. The same could be said for 20 minutes of meditative prayer as a way of conditioning your spirits.

But meditation isn't for everyone. Maybe you could commit to keeping a journal every evening. Spend time each night briefly writing what happened during the day and looking for the ways God was present for you in moments you may have been distracted.

Something else you might add to your day is a single act of compassion for someone else. It could be as spontaneous as helping someone cross a street or as planned as going to a soup kitchen to serve a meal.

Each of those, meditation, journaling, acts of compassion, is a spiritual discipline and there are many others to choose from. In fact, one of my favorite spiritual writers, Henri Nouwen, writes, "Almost anything that regularly asks us to slow down and order our time, desires, and thoughts to counteract selfishness, impulsiveness, or hurried fogginess of mind can be a spiritual discipline." The point is adding such a discipline helps us to focus. It helps us become more aware of the presence of God.

And becoming more aware of God's presence in our lives, more centered on our relationship with God, will help us to love God. And that's what these forty days is all about. You see, Jesus didn't go to the desert for your sake, or for mine, or even for his. He went there for God's sake. He went as a labor of love.

So what might be your labor of love? For in Christ we have each been enfolded in the circle of God's beloved. In him we are claimed as God's own. How will you respond to the temptations all around you, calling you away from your love? What will you do out of love for God?

Amen