

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
March 5, 2017 - LENT #1
Matt 4:1-11

A man goes into an Irish bar and orders 3 beer and goes to sit at a table in the back to drink. A while later, he orders 3 more beer. The bartender tells him, "You know, you can order one beer at a time; that way they will be colder." The man explains, "I need 3 beer at a time because I'm drinking with my two absent brothers who have immigrated, one to Canada, the other to New Zealand. All three of us do this, once a week." This pattern went on for months. Then one day, the man ordered 2 beer. "Oh, oh," the bartender thought. When the man came to order 2 more, the bartender said, "You have my sympathy, sir." The man said, "And why's that?" The bartender answered, "Well, I'm guessing one of your brothers has died and that's why you're only ordering two beer at a time." "Oh no," the man laughed, "No, that's not it at all. You see, I'm only ordering two beer because it's Lent, and I've given up drinking."

Yes, Lent has started and many of us will give things up in a way that we still maintain some control. We give up something or a behaviour to suit ourselves. It can be funny when we're really honest with ourselves. We are a creative species!

But I'm not here to criticize. I'm as guilty as the next person of trying to bargain with, or fool God. So this isn't a competition. As we heard on Ash Wednesday, what we do during Lent is between us and

God, and it's not about impressing others but about spending the time trying to discover and then surrender the behaviours and thoughts that come between God and ourselves. And if we're really open and genuine in our intention, we may be surprised how close God really is to us, and how willing to help us change the behaviours and thoughts that don't serve us or others.

Jesus, in today's reading, was being invited to maintain control of his life, and avoid all the confusion, pain and suffering involved in being human. The Spirit takes him up to the wilderness. He follows God's lead. There he enters a time of deep prayer, fasting from food. After 40 days, the biblical way of saying a considerable time, in a weakened and vulnerable state, he is tempted by the devil. The devil offers him a way out of engaging fully in the human experience. The devil says, "Go ahead, claim your divine authority and avoid suffering, humiliation, loneliness." But with each temptation Jesus claims his humanity, rejecting the easy way out. And in doing so, he connects himself to us in the most profound way. He chooses us over everything. As he chooses us and surrenders his will to God, he shows us the way to real connection with God. By surrendering control of our own lives, we too can, in our full humanity, enter fully into God's love and protection; in our willingness to listen to and be led by God, we will have life in full.

One of my teachers told about a sermon he had given on this reading from Matthew. His premise was that Jesus was tempted a fourth time. And in that temptation, the devil said, "You have resisted

the temptations of power, control, and glory..... well done, you good and faithful servant. You have earned the right to remain in the desert with your God; praying and living a quiet, good and righteous life.” To this Jesus said, “Away with you Satan, I listen only to the voice of God. I am being called out to live among the people, to teach, heal and lead them.” With that, Jesus gave up a life of ease, living simply with his God, left the desert, and started on his journey to walk out among the mass and mess of humanity towards the cross.”

After the clergy retreat at the beginning of this year, I shared with you the idea that we would follow the shape of the liturgy as a way of journeying through Lent.

These five aspects are Offering, Blessing, Breaking, Giving and Sending. (Repeat).

This week the gospel reading speaks beautifully to the first thing we do when we prepare to celebrate the Eucharist: we OFFER. When he was tempted by the devil, Jesus offered up what might have looked attractive and would have served him personally in favour of obedience to God; in favour of union with God’s purpose; in favour of relationship and love.

Here each Sunday, we OFFER up our gifts – we collect money as the fruits of our labour, and, the bread and wine which come from God’s creation. Wheat and grapes are changed by human hands into the bread and wine which we offer up to God in thanksgiving. And then the gift is returned to us in the body and blood of Jesus.

But can we offer up more than bread and wine? Our financial offerings? Did Jesus, the One we model our lives after, offer up a few denari and a bag of groceries? An hour of volunteer time?

This is the question for us this Lent. What are we willing to offer up to God? How much control are we willing to let go of? If we offer up what comes from our excess, things that are easy to part with: that one extra beer, the change in our pockets, how will our offering change us?

Offering is a profound and spiritual practice. Offering up is about giving without control or sense of reward. Jesus offers up his life to God and to us without considering the cost, or the reward. Have you ever seen the icon where Jesus points to his heart? I think he is saying that love is the only way to go. We are called to offer our hearts up to God; regardless of the price.

Sometimes we are pushed up against the wall and can't see the way forward. This week I met with someone who is in a lot of pain and feels totally useless, the pain inhibits his every movement. When I suggested he offer the pain up in prayer; for God to use in a way he might not be able to imagine; perhaps in solidarity with others who are suffering without the support and community he has, he brightened visibly. We can offer up to God experiences we never thought had any worth. Everything can be gift when we offer it up to God.

I had a very different and interesting experience in "offering" several years ago. I was invited to give a workshop in *Nonviolent*

Communication to a group of women. The woman who called me said they could only afford to offer me \$30 – 20% of my usual fee. I had a flash of inspiration. I said, “Look, I’ll come for free, but with your permission, at the end of the evening, I’d like to pass around the hat.” The woman agreed and I arrived at a well appointed home in one of Victoria’s wealthier neighbourhoods a few weeks later to give my workshop. After 2 hours, the workshop ended and I said, “If I’ve contributed to your learning and pleasure, I would appreciate if you would consider contributing to my well-being. This is how I make my living. I’m going to pass around a hat and I invite you to put only as much as you feel good about contributing.” I passed around the hat. When I got home and counted the money, I got considerably more than I would have charged. Isn’t that interesting!? When people give freely as a response to what they’ve been given, they are generous. When people give out a sense of duty, their giving has a very different flavour. They hold back, they try and use their giving to get a certain outcome.

How do we hold back from God? Do we give to placate God? Do we give from a place of true appreciation? What parts of ourselves do we hold back in reserve? What are our fears?

I recently read a book about a young man who gave up money as the only way he could think of responding to the inequity and injustice in his country. He gave away everything he owned except what personal items he needed and could stow away in a small backpack. And.... he folded a \$50 bill and kept it in his wallet. And

then he headed out into the desert in the southern states, found a cave in a national park and set up camp. He foraged and offered to work in exchange for food. But he didn't feel totally free. He was holding back. One day, a year or so later, he opened his wallet and saw the \$50 bill. He was in a phone booth. He made his call and then left the bill beside the phone. His life really changed after that. He didn't have an ace in his own back pocket; he was going to have rely fully on God and neighbour. His life got very interesting after that!

Of course not all of us are called to this kind of life; but we are all called to offer up our lives in response to the God who created us. Not out of a sense of duty, but in thanksgiving, in joy, in response to all that we, ourselves, have been given.

In the psalm we said together on Ash Wednesday, we prayed, "Create in me, oh God, a clean heart. Put a new and loving spirit within me." In order to be transformed, we must be willing to let go of outcomes and acknowledge our human dependency on God. We offer up our lives; our gifts, our failings, our suffering, knowing we have no idea where we're going and trusting that wherever we go, we go in the company of the One who is, and knows, what's best for us.

So we offer up the most precious thing we have – our lives.... if we're willing.

How can we offer up our lives?

Perhaps the best way to offer up our lives is to state our intention and ask to be led. We can pray, "How can I offer my life to You?" or "What do I need to do to grow closer to You?" or "How can I

live out my gratitude for this one fleeting and precious life?” and then spend time in quiet. Answers might come in the shape of a line from a song, or a memory from childhood, or an impulse to call someone or do something. Feelings may well up. God speaks to each of us in different ways. And invites us in ways that we can manage.

So I invite you this week to consider what you might offer up in a free and grateful way this Lent in terms of your time, talent and treasure. Saying “thank you” to God, and entering more fully into the divine exchange of love which is nothing but generous.

Amen.