

Sunday, March 9, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Don’t Be Mean”

Bill Watterson was the genius behind the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes.

He had the gift of being able to make us laugh at the simple complexities of life via a little boy and his imaginary friend, a tiger.

In one strip Calvin, the little boy asks his friend,

“Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of man?”

Hobbes, the tiger replies: “I’m not sure that man needs the help.”

Today’s reading reminds us that evil can come in all different guises.

How do you picture the devil that tempts Jesus?

Do you picture a human?

Male or female?

In a recent film that Barbara Collins showed in Sunday School the tempter was simply a red wisp – something floating in the air.

In another children’s video, the devil was personified as a rather good-looking man (albeit made out of clay) – a bit slick, but average.

I’ve thought about this a lot this week as I have reflected on these temptations that Jesus faced.

One of the things I find most disturbing about the devil in today’s reading is his ability to quote scripture.

(I recognize that I call the devil “him.”)

All of the tempter’s taunts are drawn from biblical texts:

Command these stones to become bread draws on the Exodus story of manna raining from heaven and water coming from the rock at Moses command.

Jesus is able to respond with his own quote from Deuteronomy, *One does not live from bread alone, but from every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

Next the tempter quotes Psalm 91 describing the protection God has promised to those who love him and Jesus again draws on Deuteronomy’s command that no one shall put God to a test.

Finally, the devil offers all the kingdoms and powers of the earth, and Jesus, sticking with his Deuteronomy is able to defeat the evil one for now with the command that only God is to be worshipped and served.

Jesus uses his own faith to stand strong in the face of evil.

What sort of strategies work for you when you are tempted to sin?

One commentator boiled it down to this:

“The three sins which have always afflicted human beings – greed for wealth, lust for power and unlimited satisfaction of our appetites - also afflicted Christ, and in his overcoming, we find inspiration and guidance for our own lives. The challenge, in today’s world of unconditional acceptance, is to have the courage and integrity to acknowledge our brokenness and destructiveness, and admit that we need both forgiveness and empowerment to become creative, contributing human beings who embody God’s reign.”

Courage and integrity to acknowledge our brokenness and destructiveness, and admit that we need both forgiveness and empowerment..

Do you think of yourself as a sinner?

Are you challenged in these areas of greed for wealth, lust for power or unlimited satisfaction of your appetites?

What about judgment of other people?

How about being mean?

I bring this up because I think we are easily lulled into sinful ways by devils that look surprisingly like us and often speak our language.

Last week someone shared a story with me about an anonymous letter he had received criticizing his family in a particularly hurtful way.

This story resonated with me because last year, when we welcomed the community to our meetinghouse for a town meeting, I too, received a mean-spirited anonymous letter.

Both of these cowardice acts – which is what anonymous attacks are - were carried out in our loving and lovely community.

Someone among *us* was motivated to take the time to write and send a hurtful message.

Last Sunday, Nicholas Kristof, reported on the backlash he experienced after writing an article for the New York Times about the importance of early childhood interventions as a way of preventing long-term problems for children.

The original article was accompanied by a photograph of a young mother with her hearing-impaired son.

Readers were quick to judge the mom's appearance – she was overweight and had tattoos.

In his follow up article, Kristof cites research out of Princeton University that found that our brains sometimes process images of people who are poor or homeless as if they were not humans but things.

These are our brothers and sisters – not things!

Kristof decried America's 'compassion gap' – a term to describe what occurs when our first instinct is reproach of our neighbor, rather than concern.

Our world today is awash with conflict, anger, violence of every imaginable kind, power struggles, and unfathomable greed.

A fundraising letter that came this week from the Southern Poverty Law Center noted that the organization is currently "tracking more than 1,000 active hate groups and over 650 hate websites."

Hate has become an acceptable way of life – a rallying point for community building.

The result is an epidemic of hopelessness, an expectation of conflict, a widespread acceptance of poverty – both material and spiritual - as a way of life.

We have abandoned our neighbors, hiding behind our own self-righteousness, bigotries and sense of entitlement.

I say "We" because I believe we are all complicit in this unraveling of our society.

As we embark on our Lenten journey we are called to confess our sins and seek God's mercy and forgiveness.

To do so is a personal endeavor.

You must turn inward. You must start with yourself.

You must examine your own life – not in comparison to anyone else's – just your own.

You must look deep into your soul and confirm that you are living the life that God created you to live.

You must be certain that you are using all of your gifts and talents to build God's kingdom on earth – to serve God.

You must ask yourself if there is anything that you might be doing for your neighbor that you are not doing.

This is what Lent is for.

Just as Jesus ventured into that vast wasteland to confront his temptations, we too are called to venture into our own wilderness and name our demons.

Tomorrow, I will be part of a group that will introduce the Charter for Compassion to the Salisbury Board of Selectmen.

You will remember the Charter from our discussions of Karen Armstrong's book, *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life* in 2011.

The seeds that were sown a few years ago have slowly taken root and spread throughout the community.

We have educators, clergy, activists, students – a variety of voices calling attention to the need for the principle of compassion to prevail in our culture.

To refresh your memory, the twelve steps that Armstrong referred to – a perfect 'to do list' for Lent are:

The first step is to learn about *compassion*;

The second step is to *Look at your own world*;

The third is *Compassion for yourself* – so much hate and bigotry stem from insecurities – be kind to yourself;

Fourth is learn about *Empathy*;

Fifth is *Mindfulness* – pay attention to the people around you;

Sixth is *action* - I invite you to read the charter, there are copies in the Parish Hall, or you can go online, and discern if it is something that you might lend your support to.

The seventh step is *Understanding How Little We Know* –Be humble, no one knows everything – don't shut yourself off from learning new things;

The eighth step explores *How we should speak to one another* –practice not just speaking, but listening;

Step Nine is *Concern for Everybody* – I know this is hard, but it is key;

Ten is *Knowledge* – again, keep learning;

Eleven is *Recognition* – Look around, notice whose working to make the world better – not just maintaining the status quo;

And Twelve is *Love your Enemies* – and pray for them.

These are bold initiatives, but the world will not change unless we each take responsibility for doing something.

Jesus Christ, the one we profess to follow, loved only God more than his neighbor.

He modeled for us a life of humility and compassion.

He was able to turn away evil on the strength of his own convictions.

This is my prayer for us – that we, too, will be able to face temptation and boldly proclaim that we serve God alone.