

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

First Sunday of Lent: March 9, 2025

Confronting our Darker Side

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord church on this first Sunday in Lent. This morning I will be sharing with you some tools to confront our darker side, so that, hopefully, if the devil decides to challenge you, you may confront him with compassion, but not participate.

Underlying the dialogue between the devil and Jesus are two competing storylines. We are all too familiar with these story lines in our own lives which is why this story is presented in three of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In today's reading the devil offers a storyline of self-indulgence when he states "make yourself bread from stones", he then moves on to self-aggrandizement with "all the nations of the world will belong to you if you worship me", and then to one of the scariest questions of all (which points to having a self-serving religious identity) "if you are the son of God cast yourself from the top of the temple".

Meanwhile, Jesus responds with quotations drawn from the Old Testament that show awareness of the true source of life and identity. He references God - basically the creator of all. Jesus knows that life is more than food, and he acknowledges his reliance on God the creator, "the one worthy of true worship and service", and his understanding of that creative character as "not one to be tested". Jesus' responses are rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than self - for life, glory, and identity. But even more than that is the underlying knowing that he is beloved by God. A self-assurance we all need to know – basically that we are worthy to be in this world.

What the devil was addressing in this conversation is that which truly lies within us: some of it learned behavior, some natural survival instinct. Issues like insecurity, fear, shame, disagreement, anger, unmet needs or desires are part of the human condition. Everyone is dealing with something, so how do we look honestly look at ourselves and like Jesus, have the strength to not fall for the dark side?

In an interesting text, Chase Hughes, a military contractor and expert on people and their personalities, explains that how we view the world and ourself makes a very big difference in how much pain we experience in the world. And that pain directly affects our mental state and reaction. –which - as our list of needs states – can make us act or accept a bad situation or circumstance that is regrettable.

Chase explains that if you tend to see people as broken you see the actions of others as needing to be fixed, which in turn really means you want to be in control. Hence, we invite that devil in. For example, a person will get cut off by a guy in a truck on the freeway and their emotional response is that they need to correct the situation. They may then speed up and try to cut them off or even call the police to report them so they can regain power and control. "Teach them a lesson." And I believe many of us have experienced some version of this at one time. But when we have a deeper understanding behind our reaction, we realize that our darker side was in control.

The second point of view is that people are different. The way this lens works is that you may still encounter a negative event and feel it happened to you personally, just like in our previous view. But instead of "getting even" so to speak, you push the dark thought inside. This approach can make you less likely to act out, but you may feel exhausted and burdened. And yes, I have been there before, have you? This allows our darker side to seethe quietly inside just waiting to spring on some undeserving person, like the coffee barista or your waitress, or even worse, your undeserving partner.

The third way we can view things is through the lens that people are facts. This is probably the stage the disciples were in when they were following

Jesus. This view of events is that this is just a fact. People cut other people off on the freeway just like the ocean has tidal waves. It's not good, but it's a fact that you can't change. I can be angry at the results, but not at God, creator, or mother nature. This view makes things a little easier. The darker side of us may want to take control, but we don't let it.

But the fourth view of people, and where followers of Jesus (or anyone on a spiritual journey) want to go when they are in a bind, is the lens that people are reasons. This view of the world around you can make your heart grow in compassion. It makes those other insecure, fear-based needs that drive our dark side a little less likely to succeed.

So here we go with our example of the crazy freeway driver who cuts you off. As you are cut off you slow down safely and increase the distance between you and the other driver. While this happens, you start to automatically see the action of the other person as a product of their own issues. In this view, that action is not personal.

Then when you begin exploring what might have made them cut you off, you have no negative thoughts about them, they are just doing something that we are all capable of doing. You understand that answering negative behavior with more negative behavior produces suffering. And for the most part, it will be us that suffers, not that other party.

If you take this one step deeper, we come to the view that is most like Jesus, you have compassion on the person who cut you off because clearly, they are struggling with something you may never understand, or may never know.

Life is full of ups and downs and challenges along with suffering. However, we can neutralize some of the downs and suffering by not allowing our unmet needs to feed our darker side. We, like Jesus, can see our own worth and the fact that since God our creator has put us on this earth, we are allowed to take up that space. To know that when our needs are not met, we have the opportunity to grow rather than react. We can look for solutions rather than blame. We can be secure in our faith and belief that

we are beloved children of God. This is the first step toward loving one another.

Jesus did not fall for the false view of trying to fill his immediate unmet needs. Rather he strengthened his character by seeing the devil as the weaker one, the one struggling for power, the entity that he was, and therefore not worth joining with him.

During this season of Lent, when the Christian world is called to reflect, let us recognize our own needs and how our darker side could move us to act in regrettable ways, and instead, let reason and compassion lead us forward. Amen