

March 5, 2017
The First Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Dr. Lynda Tyson
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

One of the fascinating things about Holy scripture—actually, one of the things that makes scripture Holy (for me) is its timelessness alongside its ability to be both familiar and yet new every time we hear it. Like many of you, I have heard and read the Genesis story of The Fall hundreds of times. And yet this week, for the first time ever, hearing about the first man and the first woman disobeying God, tasting the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that would lead to their expulsion from the perfect Garden into the imperfect world—this passage led me straight to another section of my bookshelf in search of Rudyard Kipling.

The author Rudyard Kipling was born in British-occupied India in 1865. He went to England as a young boy and returned to India in his teens where he enjoyed a career as a journalist, short-story writer, poet, and novelist. Kipling wrote some of the most cherished children's classics: *The Jungle Book*, *Rikki Tikki Tavi*, and my favorite, the *Just So Stories*. The *Just So Stories* tell us, in Kipling's words, of "the Time of Very Beginnings:" "How the Camel Got His Hump," "How the Rhino Got His Skin," "How the Leopard Got His Spots"—stories with playful language that begs for them to be read aloud, stories that offer an explanation of how some of the wild things we know got to be the way they are—stories that are "just so."

The Fall of humanity is a kind of "just so" story that responds to the age-old question, "If God is perfect and all God creates is "good," and God creates humanity, how is it that we humans are flawed—not always so good? The human propensity toward sinfulness must have started somewhere... Well, of *course*, says Genesis, we brought it upon ourselves. The first woman and man were unable to resist the *one thing* that would separate them from God in "the Time of Very Beginnings." They ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and there was no going back. Once something is known it cannot be un-known.

At the end of The Fall story God expels the man and the woman from the garden and God places cherubim with flaming sword on the path to the garden's Tree of Life to be certain the now flawed man and woman would not eat the fruit of that tree and live forever—a "just so" story to explain human mortality.

Before the man and woman are escorted out of the garden, Genesis says God fashioned for them clothing made of skins. Even in their sinful state, God loves what God makes and God is merciful—another "just so" part of the story. In the words of today's Psalm: "Great are the tribulations of the wicked, but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD." (Ps. 32:11)

Matthew's account of Satan's unsuccessful temptation of Jesus, even in his vulnerable state after 40 days of fasting in the desert, establishes Jesus' sin-less-ness—not giving in to hunger, not testing God, not responding at all to Satan's promise of wealth and power—three temptations many of us give into every day. We give into hunger (when we have not been fasting in the desert for 40 days), we test God's promise to save us from ourselves and from the risks we take, and we reach for (even compete for) wealth, and status, and power: three all-to-human temptations that would not get between Jesus and his worship of God.

We begin the season of Lent with these reminders that temptation and sin are part of the life we know, and (whether or not temptation and sin started with a serpent and a tree in the first garden) temptation and sin have always been "just so."

A couple of weeks ago I led a class of seminary students on a spiritual retreat, the theme of which was "Tasting the Fruits of Ignatian spirituality." Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th c. founder of the Jesuit monastic order, advocated finding God in all things because all we know is ultimately of God. The *things* in our lives, Ignatius taught, are morally neutral. It is our attitude toward things—our prioritizing of them—the importance we assign to things in our lives that renders them either things that glorify God and bring us closer to God, or things that keep us from growing closer to God. Those things in our lives that distract us from God Ignatius called "Disordered Affections," also sometimes called "Disordered Attachments." If we can detach ourselves from disordered affections we free ourselves of distractions that keep us from making good choices and keep us from fully loving God. As Jesus is quoted in Matthew and Luke, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Mt. 6:21; Lk. 12:34) The season of Lent invites us to take a hard look at what we treasure, and why. If we were to free ourselves from some of those attachments, what would that new found freedom enable us to do?

I can say with some confidence each of us has disordered attachments in our lives—things that in and of themselves have no moral connotations but it is our attachment to them, our affection for the things, that may be keeping us from growing closer to God. Such attachments can also keep us from growing closer to one another. It was amusing to read last week that the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford suggested its parishioners refrain from cell phone use on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Two whole days out of five weeks of Lent? Is it that much of a sacrifice to unplug from an electronic device for more than two days, six weeks apart? Well, apparently more of a sacrifice than the Archdiocese thought it could ask of its members. This may sound judgmental on my part, but it breaks my heart to be in a restaurant and to see a parent or 2 parents sitting at a table with children in silence, not looking at one another, *all* of them tuned into their respective electronic devices. I have to call that disordered attachment.

In 2008 when the bottom fell out of the financial markets I had a young mother visit me asking for assistance buying baby formula. While she was having trouble scraping together money to feed her family, her recently unemployed husband insisted on maintaining memberships at three country clubs because, as he told his wife, “that’s part of my identity.” Disordered attachment.

Here is a 2008 story about what Ignatian freedom from attachment looks like. A year after losing *his* job, a former Wall Street fund manager told me he had a new lease on life. He said, “I didn’t know how much I hated that lifestyle until it was taken away from me!” The man had since gone to a nearby community college to earn his teaching certificate, and he was now teaching Social Studies at an inner-city middle school. He told me he had never been happier. His wife and children were standing there as he shared his story with me, and the expressions of love on their faces said they did not miss their husband’s and father’s former 14-hr. workdays *or* his previous high six-figure salary and year-end bonus checks. They were now a whole family gathered around their dinner table. That new schoolteacher also made time to become one of the parish’s most beloved Confirmation teachers.

This Lenten season we might ask. “To what things do I attach myself?” The attachments are not neutral. So, are my attachments for the greater glory of God? Or, do they keep me from growing closer to God?

Anthony de Mello was an Indian Jesuit priest, psychotherapist, author, and retreat leader who (sadly) died in New York in his mid-fifties in 1987. De Mello was probably best known as a wonderful storyteller who drew upon mystic and Eastern spiritualities. I want to share with you one of de Mello’s parables about a *sannyasi*—a wise man. This parable is called “The Diamond.”

The sannyasi had reached the outskirts of the village and settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, “The stone! Give me the precious stone!”

“What stone?” asked the sannyasi.

“Last night the Lord Shiva appeared to me in a dream,” said the villager, “and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk I should find a sannyasi who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever.”

The sannyasi rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone. “He probably meant this one,” he said, as he handed the stone over to the villager. “I found it on a forest path some days ago. You can certainly have it.”

The man gazed at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond, probably the largest diamond in the whole world, for it was as large as a person’s head.

He took the diamond and walked away. All night he tossed about in bed, unable to sleep. Next day at the crack of dawn he woke the sannyasi and said, “Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.”ⁱ

ⁱ James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 177.