

Thoughts about an Imperfect Life and Faith: “Ordinary lives can be holy.”

Luke 4: 1-13

Intro

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The main theme of this Lenten season for us is “good enough.” It has been said, “we live in a culture bent on definitions of the “good life” as continuous upward mobility. We are taught to climb ladders to “success” and believe that the sky is the limit.” This is so true! Do you know the definition of the American dream? I feel a little awkward being a Korean and telling Americans about the American dream, but this is one definition, “The American dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society in which upward mobility is possible for everyone. The American dream is believed to be achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance.”¹ Upward mobility, success, hard work and sacrifice! We are familiar with these words and this kind of American dream. The American dream is undoubtedly part of the American ethos.

While the American dream promises freedom and equality and motivates people to wirj their lives, it also has its downsides. As income inequality has increased, the American dream seems less attainable. There is a lot of pressure to succeed, so people often sacrifice their health and relationships for upward socioeconomic status. Also, not everyone can successfully climb that ladder. Life happens and most of the time we are not moving upward but trying to regain our footing on the rung from which we have just slipped. When we cannot move up, we often feel that we have failed or that we are not good enough. If you have ever felt this way, I can assure you that that’s the devil’s deadly trap.

The Testing of Jesus

The lectionary reading for the first Sunday of Lent is always the story of Jesus being tested by the devil. We all know the devil’s three tests. First, playing on his hunger, the devil said to Jesus. “Since you’re God’s Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread.” “For the second test he led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. Then the Devil said, “They are yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I’m in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they’re yours, the whole works.” “For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, “If you are God’s Son, jump. It’s written, isn’t it, that ‘he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; they will catch you; you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone’?”

I imagine you have heard many sermons about the meaning of these temptations. I also have preached about them. But this year, I have tried reading this scripture through the lens of “good enough” and I was able to find a new meaning of the devil’s temptations. While the three tests were different, they were essentially testing Jesus’ identity. When Jesus received baptism, the Holy Spirit came down on him, and along with the Spirit, a voice said, “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.” God called Jesus God’s Son and the devil tested Jesus’ sonship with questions prefaced by, “if you are the Son of God.”

What caught my attention was that the devil tempted Jesus to prove his sonship based on his greatness or extraordinariness. The first test was turning a stone into bread. My wife, Juhee, once made bread that was as hard as a stone and wanted me to eat it, but turning a stone into

¹ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp>

bread is a totally different story. It's an extraordinary thing to do. If Jesus did it, it would prove his extraordinariness and greatness. In the second test, the devil promised Jesus all the glory and authority of the world if he worshiped him. In other words, the devil promised that "I will put you at the top of the social pyramid and make you great if you worship me!" The last one was the same. The devil wanted Jesus to jump from the top of the Temple. If angels swooped down to catch him, it would prove that Jesus was the son of God, who was very special and very different from ordinary people.

In short, the devil said, "if you are the son of God, you should be great. You must be extraordinary. Prove it by doing something extraordinary so that everyone may know that you are the son of God." I believe that we still hear the same spiritual temptations today. We believe we are the children of God and the devil wants us to prove it through our great deeds, outstanding love and extraordinary miracles and accomplishments.

Have you ever hesitated to say that "I am Christian" because you felt that you were not good enough? Perhaps you say to yourself, "I don't know much about the Bible. I don't do enough for the church and God. I am not good in doing spiritual disciplines. I am not holy enough to say that I am a Christian. I don't have any extraordinary spiritual experiences to share. I am not perfect in my faith. I am not good enough to say that I am the child of God." If you have ever felt like this, I can assure you that you are perfectly normal. Also, you don't have to be perfect to be God's child. You don't have to be an extraordinary person to prove you are the child of God because it's God who calls ordinary people like you and me as God's children. Accept God's gift with gratitude and be freed from the false desire for perfection or greatness as proof of being God's children. Instead of seeking an extraordinary experience of holiness and divinity, be grateful for your ordinary life which can be holy and sacred!

Jesus' answer was very ordinary.

To the Devil's tests, Jesus offered very ordinary answers. "One does not live by bread alone." "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Do these answers sound special? Not at all! In fact, Jesus' answers to the Devil's tests were very ordinary answers that any Jew would have known. Even our Sunday school kids would know! But that was enough to beat the devil!

You don't have to have a Ph.D. in biblical study or theology in order to know God. You don't have to have extraordinary spiritual experiences or secret knowledge about the bible to be holy! You don't have to be spectacular to be a good Christian. What you know about God and Jesus, and what you learn from the church is good enough to have a close relationship with God. The ordinary you is already holy and good enough.

In our daily devotional book, Dr. Kate shares a story about a saint of small things. Her name was Therese, born in 1873 in France. She lost her mother when she was four years old and grew up as "an emotionally sensitive and spiritually interested child." Later, she became a nun and spent her years praying, serving and writing inside a small monastery. But her life was short and she died young at age twenty-four of tuberculosis. There is nothing particularly extraordinary about her life... except the remarkable way that she decided to respond to her death. Knowing that she would soon die, she decided that her ordinary life would be lived with limitless love. She called it "the little way." Can you guess what she did? She scattered flowers.

She wrote, "Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love? Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers, and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love."

“When someone in her community would behave in a way that was ungracious or mean, she would double down and respond with even greater love and graciousness. And she felt that it freed her.” In her little way, she made her ordinary life holy.

We have just started the Lenten season and I encourage you to engage in some spiritual practices. I hope you find your own little way to make your ordinary life holy. Prayer, gardening, serving or sending a card, whatever little ways you like... find your own little way and do it. You don't have to do something great or extraordinary in your spiritual practices. Just pause and give a little more attention to your ordinary lives and you will find God tending, nurturing, and walking with you. Amen.

1. '사랑의 씨앗'을 심으세요.