

First Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): "Hello, You're Being Recorded: Our Sins, Jesus' Suffering, Holy Grace"

Matthew 4:1-11

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Holy Trinity Lutheran, Manasquan, NJ

Early morning about a week ago I was walking out the front door of the parsonage with our German shepherd Deb. It was still dark and I heard a female voice say, "Hello, you are being recorded." A little light glowing on the Ring doorbell clued me in that was the source. Some setting had changed and I had tripped an electric eye that triggered a camera to videotape me leaving home.

Then I thought: what if **everything** we say and do **were** recorded, like – by God? Of course, a lot of the time we **are** on camera, if we think of traffic cams, cc TV's in stores and parking lots – and livestreamed worship! If we remembered **all the time** that God **does** view our every act and listen to our every word, wouldn't we speak more kindly and act more honestly, faithfully, lovingly, courageously? If we got the heads up, "Among the billions of people on this earth, the Lord is going to pay special attention to **you** tomorrow," would that be good news or bad news? Would we change any of our plans? Would we necessarily want to be judged on what we did yesterday? Or last week? When we were just going about living our life and not considering eternity? But a wise woman once said, "Eternity is not something that begins after you are dead. It is going on all the time. We are in it now."

We may ask, what's the big deal? What real difference do my personal words and deeds make in the big picture? In response to that I remember a holy card I received as a child, maybe in kindergarten, 1st or 2nd grade. I've been looking for it for years and haven't found it yet, but I can still see it clear as day in my mind's eye. There's a little blonde girl

with a Dutch boy haircut, in a dress, wearing black Mary Janes and white socks, standing on tiptoe, reaching her arms up to Jesus who looks at her lovingly from the cross. It's all very child-sized, not scary, just endearing and somehow deeply moving. Loving, suffering Jesus, and a little child wanting to embrace Him with all the love and thanks in her tiny heart.

Around the time I received that holy card I was taught that each one of my sins adds a little more to the weight of the world's sin that Jesus carried in His body on the cross. So, yes, it made a difference on the **first** Good Friday whether or not I was kind or mean, whether I was generous or stingy, whether or not I treated the Lord's name like a used Macdonald's wrapper, whether I skipped worship or forgot my prayers. I still believe that, though I'm sure my adult sins weigh a lot heavier on Jesus than my 1st grade sins. *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* is a beautiful collection of devotions from various poets and writers, and includes this insight:

[Lent] is a time to let go of excuses for failings and shortcomings; a time to stop hanging on to whatever shreds of goodness we perceive in ourselves; a time to ask God to show us what we really look like. Finally, it is a time to face up to the personal role each of us plays in prolonging Christ's agony at Golgotha [Calvary]. As Richard John Neuhaus (paraphrasing John Donne) advises, "Send not to know by whom the nails were driven; they were driven by you, by me."²

We sometimes avoid sin to prevent the suffering sin causes **us**, but perhaps we can also pray to overcome temptation to prevent the suffering our sin caused **Jesus**. And if you're thinking, "But that was then, and this is now," remember: it's the eternal present for God. Spiritually, what we do now certainly **does** affect what happened then. Past, present, future, mean nothing to God, only to us. For God there is only "now."

Jesus' temptation in the desert happened after His baptism. The grace that flows to us every day through **our** baptism strengthens **us** to withstand temptation, to choose to do

what is loving over what is easy, to be faithful in our relationships with spouse, family, friends, to share joyfully rather than hoard fearfully, to use a magnifying glass or a telescope if necessary to find the positive, and yet to identify and name the negative, investing our holy energy, using prayer power, the power of the purse, the power of words, the power of citizenship to correct the injustices and banish the evils that plague God's children.

When we're not sure which path to take, which option is holy; when we're stuck at the crossroads of a decision, wanting to act faithfully but unclear what to do, when we're genuinely confused about where the path of life lies, then we can take the advice of William Barclay:

There are times when a [person] has to stop acting and start thinking. It may be that we make many a mistake because we do not give ourselves a chance to be alone with God.³

We should never minimize the power of prayer to help us discern "What would Jesus do?" and "What should I do?"

The practical question is: "How much do we want it?" How much do we want to stay on the straight and narrow, to honor God in **all** that we say and do, to sidestep temptation **always**, to love God above everything and our neighbor as ourselves? Let's remember that **grace, Heaven's power, is available to us**. In the letter to the Hebrews we're reminded that Jesus Himself was tempted, (à la today's Gospel), but He overcame temptation. He's walked a mile in our moccasins! He knows what it's like to be tempted and helps us when we find ourselves pulled in unholy directions and pushed toward selfish ends. (Hebr. 2:18, 15-16).

I heard a story on the radio last week that's a real-life parable about wanting something so badly we'll do anything to attain it. Listeners of color were asked to call in with stories told them by their oldest living relatives. One woman spoke about her grandfather who was one of the first students at Tuskegee Institute. Education was his pearl of great price. He'd had to leave school in 4th grade when he grew tall enough to reach the top of the corn stalks. That meant he could work in the fields and earn income for his family, which was essential. His younger sister continued in school past him, and would come home from school for years and teach him whatever she had learned. Eventually, in his twenties, he was able to save enough money to matriculate at the Tuskegee Institute, which would admit him unlike the majority of institutions of higher learning which were segregated. The problem was that he had money for tuition, but none for room and board. Where there's a will, there's a way, though -- when we want something badly enough. He got himself a job on a farm 10 miles away and bought himself a bicycle. He slept in the barn with the animals which he would feed when he rose at 4 a.m. Then he rode 10 miles to school, and at the end of the day 10 miles home again. He wanted an education so badly he could taste it.

How much do we want to love and honor the Lord in all that we say and do? How much do we want to love and honor our neighbor in the Lord's name, as we're commanded? When we appear on Heaven's cc TV feed, may we always show up in a snapshot of grace. Amen

¹Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1860-1935: American writer, social critic.

²*Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2003), xvii.

³William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1* (rev. edition, The Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 64.

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