

“Contending voices”

February 25, 2007

Text: *Romans 7:15-25, Luke 4:1-13*

I.

Are there different voices in your spirit, friends, contending for your attention? Different voices crying out to be appeased, to be satisfied?

Are there different voices trying to nudge us to perhaps *do* or *say* something that we know is a little bit too much, a little over the top. Something we know we do NOT want to do? Something that would disappoint those who love us and diminish us in the eyes of God?

The question for us this morning, no matter how virtuous we might be ... no matter how faithful ... no matter how obedient; the question for us is: **What voices do we listen to?** And how do we respond?

We all have our temptations in life, don't we, the different voices that do battle in our spirit.

- Temptations to want something more than we should want it ... and because we want it so very badly, we sort of twist the truth around so that it fits.
- We try and bend the facts—or our good judgment—giving it a spin that somehow justifies our hoped-for end result.

Another way of putting it would be: *we play games with ourselves*. We make bargains seeking to manipulate events to our advantage. For example, imagine for a moment that we're on a diet. Check out the self-delusion in this cute little story. This is the way temptation works in the human spirit.

II.

An overweight businessman is finally deciding it's time to take the pounds off. He's off to a good start ... working out three times a week at the health club, meticulously watching what he eats. He's even changed his driving route to the office in order to avoid his favorite bakery.

However, one morning he shows up at work with a gigantic, fresh-smelling coffee cake ... obviously, right out of the bakery oven.

Understandably, everyone at the office is disappointed in him, wondering how he could be so careless to just *blow off his diet*.

Undeterred, however, and with a glow still on his face, he says, *This is a special coffee cake. Let me explain*

Accidentally, I drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window were a host of new goodies. I felt, surely, it had to be a *sign*, so I prayed: *Lord, if you want me to have one of these delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot open right out front. And sure enough, on the eighth time around the block, there it was.*

III.

What voices is this *coffee cake-deprived* man listening to? We can just imagine, can't we? The **contending voices** ... check it out! The battle in his spirit ... he's on his way to work ...

- *Go ahead ...drive by the bakery this morning. It's okay! You don't have to buy anything! It's just to check it out.*
- *And then, the contending voice: you know you shouldn't be doing this. Why are you going by the bakery again? You've been doing so well. Turn around! Go the other route!*
- *And then, later, driving by the bakery: Whoa, check out that coffee cake ... that's really special ... has to be a new coffee cake. Go ahead, buy it. You deserve it. You can share it with the people at the office. Go for it!*
- *And the contending voice: you're not really going to buy that are you? You know this is NOT what you need to be doing. Drive on by. Drive on to the office and get on with your day.*

Our reading from **Romans 7** helps us understand this. It's the battle of *good* and *evil* that goes on within us ... or call it *sin* and *righteousness*. It's a battle that goes on in our spirit. Listen to Paul!

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Adding to this, a few verses later, I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Or if that language is too harsh for us, we can soften it, saying: *but the sin that I do not want is what I do. Or, the bad decision that I don't want to make is what I choose to do.*

The point is, at times we do things ... we say things ... that, if we were at our best (which is to say, *if we were being faithful to the best that is in us*), we wouldn't do.

The problem is, we're not always at our best. There are times, occasions, when we're more vulnerable than other times—times when the **contending voices** that rage within us threaten to topple us ... and we're tempted to *eat the forbidden fruit* ... or, *do what we do NOT want to do*, to quote Romans.

However, as Christians, the resolution lies in turning it over to God ... right there, right then ... and surrendering our will to God's will ... and then, asking God for strength and for the love and compassion and forgiveness of Christ—indeed, the spirit of Christ—to come alive in our spirit.

The spirit of Christ is the spirit of the *servant*—the one who comes to serve and to call us always to a love that warms the heart and makes all things new.

IV.

Again, what voices do we listen to, friends? How do we sort out the battle in our spirit all the time to stay on track ...

- with a diet or exercise program, or ...
- whatever plan or program of personal improvement ...
- with our family responsibilities ...
- our community and church responsibilities as well?

How do we allocate our time throughout the weeks and months? How do we sort out our priorities in ways that serve God's purposes for our lives? How do we keep our value-commitments on the front burner so we can be the person we want to be? And the person God wants us to be?

There's the story I like to tell of the old Cherokee and his grandson ... having a reflective conversation. The old man is telling the boy about *the battle that goes on inside people*.

My son, the battle is between TWO wolves inside us all.

One is EVIL. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, and ego.

The other is GOOD. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather. **But which wolf wins?**

To which the old Cherokee replied, simply, ***the one we feed.***

Everyday, we make choices about what forces within us we're going to feed ... about what impulses we're going to nourish.

The challenge is ...

- are we going to seek God's purposes in all that we do ... which at times involves risk ... and being vulnerable to failure or rejection?

- Or are we going to yield to the tug of the world and to the desires of the flesh and to spiritual laziness and apathy?

IV.

Our reading from Luke this morning describes Jesus' *wilderness* experience, which is a time of soul searching and personal reflection. This comes right on the shoulders of his baptism by John (when Jesus is *full of the Holy Spirit*, as Luke tells it) and immediately before the launching of his public ministry.

We must remember: he's fully human. And the ministry to which he has been called—which has been throbbing in his spirit—is the way of the servant. It is the way of *surrender* and *obedience*—surrender and obedience to the claim God has on his life.

That's a major commitment—a commitment that he has been wrestling with, internally, no doubt for years. The *wilderness* experience, for all of us, as with Jesus, is a time of sorting out the **contending voices** from within.

- How much am I able to give up?
- How much of my ego, of my desire, am I willing to subordinate to God's calling?
- Can I be obedient to God's will? Can I surrender?

The purposes to which God calls us, friends, are always larger than ourselves. And as Christians, they always involve some element of *surrender* ... and of becoming the *servant*.

V.

Jesus is trying to work all of this out. He's just been baptized ... which means he's been drawn in to God's presence and in to God's spirit in *life-changing* ways. He's been called apart from the world and signaled out. There's commitment in our baptism, big time. It's a new way of life.

And now, in his *wilderness* experience, Jesus is trying to make sense of it all. He's trying to solidify his commitment. There are **contending voices** in his spirit. One of these voices, symbolized by the devil in our scripture reading, is TEMPTING Jesus.

Leave the way of the servant, the voice says, and assert yourself. You can do it!

1. *If you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*
2. *And then, showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, the devil says to him: To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. Just worship me and it'll all be yours.*

That's some temptation! Think of it! All the kingdoms of the world, all the joy and pleasure imaginable ... all the power and stature. Just worship me. Just sell out; give up the *servant* thing.

3. And then, lastly, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple, saying to him: *If you are the son of God, throw yourself down from here. For God will command his angels to protect you ...and on their hands they will bear you up.*

These temptations are all about worldly values ... they're about superficial stature and power. But the spirit is strong in Jesus and he prevails. And the **contending voice** of the devil does not revisit him until, much later, when he's on his knees, wrenching in sweat, in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest.

VI.

Today marks the first Sunday of Lent, a period of spiritual cleansing and renewal.

It's a time of remembering the depths and the passion of God's love ... a time when, hushed in prayer, we remember our mortality ...

*Come close to us, O Holy One, come close.
Call us, again and again, to the spiritual high ground of your presence.*

*Be our companion, O spirit of love ...
In the desert of our lives, never let us walk alone ...*

*Touch us in our need ...awaken us again and again to your divine purposes, through
Jesus Christ our Lord.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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