**“Ultimatum Thinking”**

Genesis 2:15-17; Genesis 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

In today’s Gospel, Jesus responds to the devil with the following:

*“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* And,

*“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”*

I feel like this piece of the Gospels is the year 30 CE’s version of the TV show Super Nanny. For those of you who may not be familiar with this show, an experienced Nanny is sent to a different family each week who has lost such control of their household that their children are now literally running it. Super Nanny swoops in and trains the parents in effective ways to remain calm, yet firm as they set limits on their children, who are constantly testing the parental boundaries. I have been there many many times myself--“If you’re really who you say you are--the all-powerful mom--then surely you can figure out how to get me to put this bread down and eat these vegetables! If you really think talking things through and not resorting to screaming is the best way to go, then surely *you* can keep calm while *I* have a massive tantrum on this airplane.” I wish I could say I am as masterful as Jesus, calmly replying that “One does not live by bread alone, but by vegetables, too” or “Do not put your mother to the test,” and that Simon now eats everything I put on his plate and Kate is angelically behaved in all confined public spaces. But I’m not, and they aren’t.

But Jesus, the model of Super Nanny’s counsel, refuses to be drawn into the devil’s manipulations. Despite being desperately hungry, he does not engage the devil by turning the stones into bread. He does not fall into the need to prove himself by jumping off the temple. He does not respond to the tests. And so, the devil stops testing.

Now, I am not comparing my kids to the devil, really. I am just saying that there are parallels.

If this was where I spent most of my spiritual time—as the tested parent needing encouragement to not engage, the success Jesus achieves with the devil in this passage would comfort me. But unfortunately for me, and maybe for some of you, in my spiritual life, I am most often the boundary-pushing child. And as this boundary-pushing child, I really want to know, why can’t I push God’s boundaries? Just as my children test me, why can’t I test the parent of all parents?

As I wrestled with this sermon, it was not only the Gospel reading that challenged me. The Genesis reading did as well. As this same petulant, boundary-pushing child of God, I read again the story of Eden, of the tree of knowledge—apparently beautiful to look at—placed right in the center of the Garden—and of God, telling Adam not to eat of it. To this child’s eyes, it looks like a test. It looks like a challenge to Adam and Eve’s ability to respect the limits. So, if God is allowed to test us…again….why can’t we test God?

The thing is, many of us, perhaps even most of us do test God. Many of us put ultimatums before God, just as the devil did. “if you really loved me, God, you would do X, or Y, or Z.” Even during periods where I feel that my relationship with God is going very smoothly, I am still frequently testing God. Maybe my prayers pose a subtle ultimatum or two: I pray for a specific outcome, the implication being that if I don’t get that outcome, then God failed the test. Even as I give this sermon, having engaged in stretching conversations with seminary friends about the function and meaning of prayer, I still often find myself praying in ultimatum—“God, I lift up to you my process toward the priesthood—strengthen me, guide me, inspire my heart and mind as well as those who discern with me.”

But, if I am honest with myself, the subtext is really “If you really love me, and you really called me into the ministry, God, then you’d better make sure the process goes smoothly.” If this doesn’t happen, then the ultimatum logic tells me that God does not really love me, and did not call me into ministry. Test failed.

I am going to allow for a few moments of quiet, and I want you to think about whether you might do the same thing? What ultimatums might you may have given to God recently?

As some of you know, my parents got divorced when I was 13. Although this is among the events I now count as an immense blessing, as I am now able to know my parents in ways I couldn’t have had they stayed in that union, their divorce was difficult for me. From my earliest memories, I have been a Daddy’s girl. Of the three of us, I was the child who played sports, who played music, who loved to be in Church—all things that were distinctly “of my father.” As such, I had the privilege to spend a great deal of time with him. If we weren’t playing catch or shooting baskets, we were going on pastoral visits or hanging out at Church.

When my parents divorced, my father moved into an apartment across town, and I saw him on Tuesday nights, and every other weekend. And I missed him, terribly. I wondered day after day, how could he leave me? And that grief, and fear, and anger came out in the form of a series of ultimatums—“If you really loved me, you’d come back.” “If you really cared about me, you’d ask to take me with you.” Even the anorexia I developed during that time, in some form, was an ultimatum--- “Come back, or I’ll fade away into nothing.”

My father did *not* come back. My father did *not* petition my mother for custody of me.

He did not respond to my ultimatums, or so I thought. So, I closed the loop of the ultimatum logic, and came to believe that he did not really love or care about me. I pulled away from him. I stopped going for scheduled visits. I asked him not to attend my sporting events. I began to decline his phone calls.

The thing about ultimatums is, they are entirely self-focused. Ultimatum thinking cannot conceive of the other person’s perspective.

Since that time, I have come to learn that my father could not come back and be a whole person—their marriage had become a form of spiritual and emotional violence for both of them. I have also come to learn that my father thought a great deal about petitioning for custody of me, but ultimately felt that the healthiest place for me would be with my siblings, and in the structure and environment I was used to. And, I have come to learn that *he watched every sporting event*, standing far from the fields or the track or the court, where I wouldn’t have known he was there.

This is the danger of ultimatums and tests—they cannot incorporate two perspectives, and so, they cannot be fully open to the *truth*. They are, in essence, singular, *un*relational. For me, God, the three-in-one and, therefore, relational in God’s essential-most being, is a God who cannot conceive of ultimatums. Ultimatums are about gaining control, while in my experience, God is about giving it up. Ultimatums are about a loss of trust, while God is about seemingly reckless trust--faith.

To many scholars, this is the message of the Eden story. Adam and Eve are not being tested by God. Rather, God has given them something beautiful to look at in the Garden, but noted the boundaries they are to adhere to regarding it—boundaries that are put there out of care, concern, and stewardship for Adam and Eve. The serpent erodes their trust in God, and they ultimately attempt to gain control of the tree, themselves.

As one scholar wrote, “The serpent, then, is correct in saying the humans would become like God(s), knowing good and evil. It claims that God has not told them the full truth about the matter, that God keeps something back. In this, the serpent acts not as a deceiver but as a truth-teller. But what was God’s motivation for not telling them the whole story?...The issue of knowledge thus becomes at its deepest level an issue of trust. Can the man and the woman trust God even if God has not told them everything?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, to me, Jesus’ response to the devil--*“Do not test the Lord your God”* and its reference to Deuteronomy--is not meant to be an authoritarian display of God’s power over us, God’s petulant children, but instead, reflects the truth of testing in a mutually-respectful adult relationship, which is what we really do have with God, even though that often seems too daunting to fully claim. Testing is poison to mature relationships; It is incapable of seeing past one perspective. It attempts to control, and it evidences an absence of trust that God can have our best interests at heart, even if God hasn’t told us everything.

So, if a lack of trust is at the heart of our ultimatums, what do we do? How do we build trust in our relationship with God—transcendent and yet incarnate, Father yet Son, male and female yet neither? Beyond our human ability to fully comprehend, even if we were to be “told everything”?

Someone close to me frequently encourages me to “just chat with Jesus--sit and have coffee with him,” which I think is meant to suggest to me that Jesus is just like one of us. But for me, being in relationship with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit is something radically different from any human relationship I have known—I am stymied much of the time precisely because I cannot just sit down and have coffee with the members of the Trinity. I would have learned to like coffee by now were it that simple, for me at least.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus responds to each of the devil’s temptations by quoting Deuteronomy—Holy Scripture to this Jewish Messiah-- one of the five books of the Torah. Jesus resists the temptations with words from his tradition’s sacred Scripture, now ours as well. To me, this is an invitation to do the same when we feel tempted to mistrust God—to doubt that God really sees us, knows us, loves us, and has our best interests at heart, despite the fact that God has not told us everything. I wonder whether we might return to our favorite parts of scripture to begin to rekindle that trust.

What are your favorite scripture passages? Which lines or stories, when read aloud to you, make your hairs stand on end? Or, give you that feeling that you are home? Think again about your ultimatums, and see if some of your favorite scripture passages might invite you from ultimatum thinking into a wider truth, into a letting go, into God’s loving embrace.

May God speak to us through our Holy Scriptures…or else. AMEN.

1. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary [↑](#footnote-ref-1)