**“The Temptation to Prove Ourselves”**

A sermon preached by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

Lent 1, 2016

Text: Luke 4:1-13

*Almighty God, come quickly to help us, who are assaulted by many temptations. AMEN.*

How many of you have seen Making a Murderer, or heard of it? For those of you who haven’t, it’s a 10-episode Netflix documentary about a man named Steven Avery who was wrongfully convicted of a serious crime, did time, and then, so the documentarians contend, wrongfully accused again, this time of murder, just months after his release. There has been much debate about this documentary—whether it is more story than objective news reporting, but whatever the “truth” of the crimes, the documentary takes its viewers through the exhausting and deadening toll on Steven and his family, of his persistently, unceasingly over DECADES being asked to prove his character. He loses key familial relationships as a result; he loses two intimate relationships; his parents lose their family business; his spirit slowly diminishes, as do those of his parents.

PAUSE

I couldn’t help but think of this documentary now when I read again of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Certainly, Jesus is not being accused of murder and it is not at all my intention to put Steven Avery on equal footing with Christ. But, just as for Steven, today we hear of Jesus’ 40 days of unceasingly being asked to prove the nature of his character. If you are really who you say you are, says the Devil, or who you think you are, then turn these stones into bread and feed yourself—or better yet, make an attempt on your life and see whether your divine Father actually saves you.

But, unlike Steven Avery who HAS to mount a defense, Jesus simply refuses. Jesus does not, in any way, engage the temptation to prove any part of his character, least of which whether or not he is all-powerful—Something he will stick to right up to his death on the cross. We will see in the weeks to come that instead, he focuses his full attention on discerning how God is asking him to use his life and person to love.

Although on the surface it may not seem like it, each of us faces this same persistent temptation to prove our characters, as well as the temptation to ask others to prove theirs.

This week, did you ever feel like you needed to prove that you are hard-working? That you are a team-player? That you are are nurturing? That you are creative?

This week did you ask a colleague to prove their loyalty to you by seeing your viewpoint as best? (I did…you can ask Chris) Did you ask your spouse to prove they really care for you by not only doing something for you, but doing it just the way you would do it? (I did…you can ask David)

Being hard-working, self-less, nurturing, creative, loyal, and caring are each essential to many of our careers, not to mention our roles as spouses, parents, friends, and community members. More importantly, they are essential to carrying out the paticular work of LOVING that God has given each of us to do.

BUT…the need we perceive to PROVE ourselves distracts us from the work of God, itself, that requires these gifts. When we are so focused on proving that we have these gifts of Holy character, we have no time and energy to listen for how God wants us to *use* them.

Just as it is for Steven Avery, this perceived need to prove, or to ask others to prove, is incredibly destructive. Unlike Steven Avery, though, who’s freedom DEPENDS upon his proving the nature of his character, our freedom is LOST when we spend our time in this exhausting cycle of proving and asking others to prove.

* + Think of the anxiety that consumes us when we feel like we need to prove ourselves
  + Think of the fear that comes when we ask others to prove themselves—what if they fail? Will we still remain in relationship with them?
  + Think of how much harder it is to hear how God is calling us, in that very moment, to an act of love, for ourselves, or someone else?

PAUSE

It’s also worth noting that this proof cycle stifles our freedom not only as individuals, but as an entire people of God.

Our individual and institutional racism, sexism, and classism have asked people of color, women, and those who are poor to prove the nature of their characters in order to gain their own freedom…and this societal temptation to proof has cost ALL of us that joyous, Holy freedom that comes to an entire community when all are able to pursue the call of God.

But in our passage today, Jesus offers us the invitation to jump right out of this hampster wheel.

It is with this passage as our lectionary reading for today that the Church invites us to observe a “Holy Lent”--6 weeks of self-examination and repentance through prayer, fasting, self-denial, and reading and meditating on God’s holy Word, as our Ash Wednesday Liturgy articulated it earlier this week.

Prayer, fasting, self-denial, scriptural reading, and meditating have been used throughout history by Christians to learn to let go of our intense attachment to what people think of us and…what we think of them.

Through these practices, we are invited into 6 whole weeks of the gracious freedom that comes from staring down the temptation of feeling like we have to prove ourselves, and simply not engaging it--walking away. We so often think of Lent as a dark, oppressive time. But, through these practices and the modeling of Jesus in our Gospel passage today, we are invited not into the wilderness, but out of it.

The invitation in Lent is not to give something up simply so that we will be tempted. We are ALL tempted day in and day out, as individuals, and as a society, with the very same temptation the devil put before Jesus.

As I sit with our Gospel passage today, the invtiation the Church is offering me in Lent, in the very midst of this temptation, is to give something up, or take something on, for the purpose of helping me step out of the wheel.

* Maybe examining my reactions through journaling will help me let the need to prove myself, or ask others to prove themselves, go
* Maybe meditation will…or at least it might help me to hold it much more loosely.
  + - Maybe spending a few minutes with a daily scripture devotional will.
    - Maybe prayer will.
    - Maybe even giving up chocolate or alcohol, if the intention is there each time I crave it….or especially so if alcohol, or chocolate I suppose, is a trigger of the proof-requiring mindset.

PAUSE

When Jesus returned from his time in the wilderness, the very first thing we are told about him in Luke’s Gospel is that he was “Filled with the power of the Spirit.”

The promise is there that we, too, will be filled with the power of the Spirit—with the power of newfound time, energy, joy, closeness to God—if we can step off the wheel.

If we can loosen our grip on proving we have the wonderful divine gifts we most certainly have, we are promised that the Spirit will empower us to use them in love on behalf of God, and to receive that love in full measure.

This Lent, what can you do….or where can you go…or who can you spend time with to help you disengage the feeling that you need to prove yourself? And help you resist the temptation to ask others to prove themselves?

And, how wide is your imagination for the ways in which the Spirit will use the joyous love that sprouts in you if you do?

AMEN.