

1 Lent C Feb. 14, 2016

Temptations, dust, and rising up

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She didn't like Pamela from the moment she met her. After a speaking engagement, Dr. Brene Brown, a research professor whose TED Talk called "the Power of Vulnerability" is one of the top 5 viewed TED Talks of all time and author of several bestselling books including her newest book *Rising Strong*, found herself literally nose to nose with a woman she called Pamela who working as a scout for a conglomerate company whose job was to look for potential speakers for company events. This woman's personality grated against Dr. Brown, who admittedly writes in her new book that she is actually uncomfortable when it comes to mingling with people after speaking events. During the encounter, Dr. Brown learned Pamela was unhappily employed, angry and bitter that her life hadn't turned out the way she had wanted and that now she was seeking speakers for a job she felt she could do better herself.

Dr. Brown did little to acknowledge Pamela's frustrations, mostly because she found her annoying, and was relieved when a group of students politely asked if they could talk with her. Unfortunately for Dr. Brown, her encounter with Pamela was not over. A few weeks later she received an email from Pamela informing her she had pronounced the name of a prominent philosopher incorrectly during her talk.

The interpreted tone of the email, the memory of the encounter, and the unasked for feedback hit Dr. Brown hard. She felt insulted and hurt and she felt shame. Those feelings combined to make way for anger and inspired Dr. Brown to respond in a way that would put Pamela in her place.

As the words of the song "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" went through her mind, Dr. Brown composed an email response to Pamela that pointed out her faults as she saw them, and included what Pamela had told about her unhappiness with her work and some demeaning words she had said about her employers. To top it off, Dr. Brown copied the email to Pamela's employer. Dr. Brown said she felt wonderful after she finished the email. She felt vindicated and yet, she hesitated before she clicked "SEND". She wasn't sure if sending the email was the best course of action, yet she felt really good about the email.

Dr. Brown decided to share the email with her therapist and get her thoughts. After explaining the whole situation, and reading the emails her therapist asked her why she wanted to copy Pamela's employer and what she wanted Pamela to feel when she read the email.

That is when something deeper than anger crept over Dr. Brown and she admitted she wanted Pamela to feel the same way she had made her feel: small and caught in the act of being something she wasn't. Dr. Brown realized her email wasn't really about Pamela's bitterness or unasked for feedback, it was the trigger that feedback touched; the fear Dr. Brown herself has that she isn't good enough.

Instead of sending the email, Dr. Brown did a little more work of her own coming to peace with her own identity and the work of discerning how she wants to live in a world that continually pressures all of us, women and men, to look and speak in certain ways.

I am so grateful for Dr. Brown's willingness to share incidents like this in her books and talks because she courageously shows us how easy it is to give into temptation and what temptation is really about.

Every year on the first Sunday in Lent we hear the part of Jesus' story where after his baptism he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for the purpose of being tempted by the devil. We heard Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days, which is Bible speak for a long time, and that this was a difficult and challenging time for Jesus. It was a time lacking in food and shelter and friends. It was a time he was feeling the pains of being human by feeling hungry and alone.

We might ask why the Holy Spirit would do something like that? Which is just another way to ask what is this event really about and why is it told in the synoptic Gospels? Some say this is a story about identity. Identity that goes way back to the Old Testament, to the Israelites, to God's People who were free from slavery in Egypt and yet were not able to live into their identity as God's people. Instead they succumbed to temptations to fill their stomachs, to gain power by taking it from the powerful empires and believed that being God's People meant God would give them special privileges. Those were the same temptations offered to Jesus, but they weren't really about filling his belly or becoming rich and powerful or proving that God would keep him safe from harm. They were about what it means to be God's People, to live as God's beloved.

As God's beloved, God has given us all the power to choose. We can choose to love God or not.

Each time Jesus was tempted he made a choice, and each time he chose God. It's easy to miss that because in our Gospel today we heard Jesus quote scriptures, and so it sort of looks like Jesus and the devil are engaged in some Bible Trivia type deal, sort of like the song the "Devil Went Down to Georgia" only with Bible verses instead of fiddles. But really the temptations weren't about who knew the Bible better than the other, it was about how does a person live into those words in the Bible, and what those words say about being God's beloved.

Choosing to love God means believing life is not about consuming, or blindly filling our empty bellies or lonely hearts with food or stuff or whatever anyone happens to be selling. Choosing to love God means choosing the power of God's love instead of power that comes from being the biggest or the most clever or the most intelligent or the wealthiest. Choosing to love God means we aren't better than anyone else, instead we are charged with showing God's grace and forgiveness to the world.

While it might be easy to say Jesus was able to stand against the devil's temptations because he is the Son of God, and that means we are off the hook, the truth is we all face temptations every now and again. Just like Dr. Brown did. It is also easy to think of temptations as something big, like turning a rock into a loaf of bread. You and I can't do anything like that. But when we look at the temptations as being about how we live our faith and our identity as God's beloved, well then it might hit a little closer to home.

Like Dr. Brown's easy to relate to story: usually temptations go after our weak spots, and can trigger fears or insecurities or wounds and make it so easy for us to choose to act out of those fears or insecurities or wounds instead of God's love. And the truth is sometimes we do choose anger or fear or hurt. Sometimes we want the person who hurt us to feel our hurt. And while that is a human inclination, we don't have to choose to live into it. Dr. Brown goes on to write in her book *Rising Strong* that sometimes we all fall down, or fall short, and end up, in her words, "with our face in the dust." But she also writes, we don't have to stay there. That when we find ourselves face down in the dust, we can take a look around, think about how we got there, and then do the work of rising again to try again. She says this is holy work, growing work.

Ash Wednesday was just a few days ago. A few days ago we had ashes placed on our foreheads to remind us both of our mortality and God's love. We also were reminded that those ashes can also symbolize our sin, the times we have fallen short of loving God with our whole selves and loving our neighbor; of those times we were face down in the dust.

It might not be pleasant to have that reminder, we might be tempted to forget those moments we've fallen short and move on, but if we ignore those times then we miss the opportunity for the holy work of rising and growing. The Spirit-filled holiness of the work of rising is that we are not really alone, God is with us. Another lesson we can learn from Jesus' time in the wilderness is he's been there too.

Perhaps that is why the Church gives us this season of 40 Days of Lent. Not to make us feel shame or rub our noses in the dust, but to remind us that when we find our faces full of dust because we've fallen, God has not fallen out of love with us. God loves us so much God is with us in the dust. God forgives us. And we can choose to get up again by accepting God's forgiveness and forgiving ourselves, but it takes work, it takes intentional thought and self-reflection and prayer. That is why the Church seems to inundate us with resources this time of year, because the Church knows this isn't easy work and wants to help us. Here at Church of the Good Shepherd we are giving away the Living Well through Lent books of daily readings. We are also having small group discussions on the book and Wednesday evening programs featuring our own parish members who are willing to share not only their spiritual practices, but ways those spiritual practices have helped them through struggles. There are other resources, and I want to encourage you to use what you believe will help you with this 40 Day season of acknowledging the dust of our falls, and the renewing work of rising again.

With God's love and help, Lent can be more than a period of fasting, it can be a season of choosing to live as God's beloved by choosing to love God by learning to view our falls or near falls as the opportunity to examine where we are, reflect, and do the holy, life giving work of rising again.