

First Lesson: Genesis 2:15:17; 3:1-7
Second Lesson: Romans 5:12-19
The Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

First Sunday of Lent
March 1, 2020

“Power of Prayer: Healthy Boundaries Diminish Temptation”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Judith Rainforth
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Gracious and loving God, we ask that you be with us in the ways that the Gospel proclaims here at American Lutheran Church so that we can take it out into the world to make a difference by being your hands and feet. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen

Today we continue our series on prayer. If you were here Wednesday night, you know that I put out another challenge. During Advent, I put out the challenge to read the book of Luke. There were 24 chapters and you read them and you told me you read them. I believed you. Now I ask you to keep a prayer journal. Tomorrow the women coming to the prayer retreat will be learning more about that, but it is really easy – all you need to do is write down your prayers. I don’t care what your journal looks like, you can go over and get them for a dollar at Dollar General over there. Keep track of your prayers and then keep track of how you think they are being answered, or not answered, or if they are being answered in a different way than what you think they would be answered. Just see how you grow throughout this Lenten journey.

Today we are going to be focusing on how important prayer is and how important prayer was in Jesus’ life. I hope that we are inspired to use prayer to overcome temptations and to find healthy boundaries in our lives today and in the days to come. Rick, do you want to play us a little of the movie that we started watching on Wednesday night? Debbie Nelson shows this movie in the choir room and I so loved it that I have taken clips out of it for our journey through Lent.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting 40 days and 40 nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Then the devil took him to the Holy City and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. He said, “If you are the son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, he will command his angels concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” Jesus answered him, “It is also written do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me satan, where it is written worship the Lord your God and serve him only.” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

I love the way this portrays Jesus in his humanness and being tempted and how he dealt with it. He dealt with it because he had confidence in his father. Do we have that confidence in God the Father Almighty so that we can be so sure of ourselves? I don’t think I would hold a candle to what I saw there when it

comes to temptations, but I have learned over the years how to live with temptations in a more positive way because as we study the word, we mature spiritually.

There is a poem written by Robert Frost. It is called *Mending Wall*. In that he wrote, *Good fences make good neighbors*. I was thinking about how that fits into the Gospel reading today because many of us struggle with boundaries that diminish our abilities to resist temptation. How do we do this? For me I found an acronym over the years that is called H-A-L-T. I watched this movie clip and I thought all of these probably applied to Jesus. *I can't get too **hungry**. I can't get too **angry, lonely or tired*** or I become a weaker individual. When I am **hungry** I eat. If I am **angry** I try to understand why I am feeling angry – do I need to talk to somebody, do I need to ask for forgiveness or am I just angry at myself? What is going on? If I am **lonely** I need to reach out to somebody. I live alone so when I get **lonely** sometimes it creeps into my mind – why Lord? I have a foster dog now and that helps a lot. Jesus said you need this. I really do think it was from God. I get to ride a horse, one of our parishioners is very kind to let me ride. There are ways that I deal with that, but most of all we need to identify what in our life brings us to those places where we are tempted, where we get that committee going on in our head that says crazy things to us. Hungry, angry, lonely, **tired**. When I am **tired** I have to rest. I don't know that I am tired until I sit down, or lay down, then I know I am tired. If you ask me if I'm tired, no, I'm full of energy. That's how I deal with it on a personal level.

We either let people trample our fences or we erect stone walls where wooden fences would suffice. We need to be careful that we not set overly strict boundaries on ourselves in some areas of our hearts and minds and not enough boundaries in other areas. I think the more we read and study about God, and the more we understand about ourselves, we know what our weaknesses are. We know what tempts us. If we spent some time sharing, some of them would be similar and some of them wouldn't be. Some would surprise us what tempts another human being. It doesn't matter whether we are Christian or not, we are all tempted just as Jesus was tempted up on the mountain. He had to be all those things that I just talked about.

A life with boundaries is pleasing to God. Jesus set that example and we need to remember that. In Matthew 5, verse 37, we read *All you need to say is simply yes or no, anything beyond this comes from the evil one*. You notice, Jesus didn't elaborate, he didn't apologize why he wasn't turning the stones. He didn't apologize, he didn't try to explain to the devil. We don't have to either, simply yes or no will suffice. How many times have you said yes, but you really wanted to say no? How often have you said no when you needed to say yes? Have you ever considered that evil as Jesus describes it in the Gospel? If you have clear, well defined boundaries, your yes will mean yes and your no will mean no. Boundaries may seem like restrictions, but like all of God's law, they provide true freedom for us, and lasting peace. God's laws are like speed limits, they keep us safe. I have to remember that when I am driving. I am not up here to make any confessions, but laws do keep us safe. God's law, the law of the land. Freedom to say things like this "No, I won't be able to lead that committee this year, but I'll help you find somebody that can." How many times do we serve beyond what our heart and soul is ready for? How many times do we serve until we are burned out?

A dear pastor of mine, Pastor Wenda, said something to me in the same church that Pastor Lowell and I were ordained in in Elkhorn, Nebraska, Bethany Lutheran. There were a group of us that were learning how to be communion assistants. She looked at us straight in the eye and said, "I am going to say one thing to you right now, if this ministry doesn't make your heart sing, find another ministry that does." I

have never forgotten that. I would not be here standing before you today if that were not true about my ministry. I love what I do, otherwise I would have said to Lowell, “Absolutely not. I am not going to pray about it, I am not coming to the desert!” I pray that I remember that and I pray that you remember that. Find a ministry or ministries in this church that makes your heart sing because I know when you are doing something that doesn’t. It shows, I can see it on your face, I can see it in your body language. I am not going to invite you out of a ministry you are in, but I am going to remind you – are you burned out? If so, maybe there is somebody else that needs to do it. Maybe you can find one that makes your heart sing. I feel like this congregation, American Lutheran Church, is so filled with joy.

I mentioned earlier in the first service, I almost feel like rather than this being the first Sunday of Lent, we are celebrating Easter. I think we do in some ways because we have a resurrection faith and even in the midst of our brother Pastor Lowell being ill, we know he is coming back, we just don’t know when. Hopefully sooner than later. We don’t have to have long faces about anything. Pastor Wally was in this service before, he just lost his wife Lavonne. It has been a long journey because she suffered, but he is not having a long face. He is celebrating her life and death because he has faith, he has learned, like you and I are, along the way that we are going to have things that come up but if we listen to God’s word we will be more equipped.

Another one you might want to say to practice your boundaries is “Yes I will eat this salad instead of the pizza because I am trying to maintain my weight.” That’s an easy one – right? Haha. Or this one I love “Yes I will stand up for myself because God doesn’t want me to cower in fear.” Whenever I am intimidated by somebody, I like “Wait a minute, God help me. Help me not to shrink, help me to stand because you give me the strength to do that.” These are ways that we deal with our boundaries. They seem simple, but they are not simple. We need to pray and cultivate our relationships, not only with God but with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ so that we can share our struggles, and how do we maintain our boundaries, and how do we overcome temptation? How do we not be intimidated when somebody says no to us? Respect that because God is the only one who uses yeses and noes perfectly. So when you say no, it doesn’t have to be guilt producing. When we see ourselves as children of God and we can’t do it all. We all have personality, I don’t know what we want to call them, maybe defects. Since I was a little girl, I can still hear my mother saying years after she left this earth, “Judy, you can’t do it all.” I can’t, but oh how I want to. I want to just do it. No, we can’t. So we need to get out of the way and let other people do some of it.

We can learn through prayer and meditation when saying yes is wise but only when we make a commitment out of a grateful and generous spirit. Moving from a life without boundaries to a life with boundaries takes practice and discipline. I don’t mean boundaries that are stone walls, we need boundaries. We need to say “is this healthy or not healthy”? It also takes support and accountability. As I said before from our brothers and sisters in Christ. Don’t go out there looking for evil to guide you. There are a lot of people that would like to tell you “You don’t need to go to church. You don’t have to do that, let’s just go play.” Our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ can help us to learn when to say yes to have the best life possible with Jesus.

Sometimes having poor boundaries has defined our lives in the past. But the past is passed and today is the present. We can pray our way into better living with Jesus. So let go of whenever you were tempted and gave into it before, because we all have been there. We are not here to make judgments of anybody’s temptations, how they did, or didn’t overcome them. We need to live in today and use all that energy.

Have you ever thought about how much energy you use living in the past? It's incredible. It sucks the marrow right out of your bones. Also, to not be around toxic people, that one was hard for me. I just thought "Oh, I need to be sweet to everybody." I need to protect myself from toxicity. Ask God to give you guidance and wisdom and he will give you great peace and serenity by helping you repair and rebuild boundaries, and to be freer from temptation. As you are in your prayer journal, because I know most of you are going to do that, right? You may want to identify and pray about what are the temptations – do you even recognize what they are because they have become so *whatever*. Talk to your spouse or whomever. I just had somebody share with me after they heard about boundaries, they sat down and talked over the dinner table about it. They gave up some things they were doing that seemed okay, like going to play bridge every week. He said they enjoyed the people, but we couldn't stand playing bridge. He said it just sucked the marrow right of our bones. I thought, boy, isn't that the truth.

Go home, think about what it is you are doing for Jesus Christ, and what is it he wants you to be doing? And then pray about it. Let's pray now. Gracious and loving God, help me to overcome the temptations through prayer and meditation. Help me to keep coming back and learning more about you. Help me to be inspired by your Holy Spirit to have healthy boundaries and to let go of poor boundaries. Help me to have the wisdom to know the difference. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen