

Resisting the Devil
Luke 4:1-13
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1st Sunday in Lent
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The scene of crime scene was the gym where my childhood church basketball team played games every Saturday during basketball season. In the lobby of the gym was a selection of candies – Kit Kats, Hershey bars, Twix, just to name the ones that tempted me the most. Somehow I ended up there alone, before or after a game, staring at the Kit Kats, and the little cardboard honor box setup to receive a few coins in return for a treat. And then I took one. I stole it.

The voice that I heard in my head that day might have been the devil, but it sounded like my voice, trying to convince myself that I had every justification for sating my hunger. “Other kids probably got more allowance than my cheap-skate parents,” I told myself. “Other kids get candy whenever they want it. Surely I deserve this. Perhaps I have a medical condition that requires chocolate supplements prior to physical exertion. That’s why my desire was so strong. This Kit Kat probably just saved my life. Their prices are too high anyway. Robin Hood would take this Kit Kat just to teach this stingy church a lesson.” I remember that voice in my head filled with sophisticated ways of convincing myself that I was something other than what I had become – a thief! 613 commandments in the Bible and I had broken one of the top ten!

My guilt grew and grew that week like a balloon that was certain to pop. I was sicker than a whole box of chocolates could induce. My crime was known to no one but Jesus, but that was the worst thing of all. I had fallen! Fallen from a subpar shooting guard on Jesus’ basketball team to a thief who stole from his church! A crook who robbed Jesus of his Kit Kats. (You think it’s funny. But you try stealing from Jesus and then tell me how you ever recover from that.)

I lived in agony all week desperately wanting to be cleansed of my sin. I prayed to Jesus to please forgive me for stealing from his storehouse of Kit Kats. That next Saturday I couldn’t wait to get back to the gym. I waited until no one was looking then dropped the coins in the box that could restore my honor. I dropped in a few extra coins for interest, hoping Jesus would see just how sorry I was. And I never stole again.

I had been tested, the other English word that can be used for the Greek word for temptation. I had been tested and found wanting. Luke seems particularly interested in this kind of testing. We pray Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer each Sunday– “lead us not into temptation” but Luke’s Jesus petitions God to “do not bring us to the time of trial,” or “testing.” Later in Luke, he tells the disciples “Pray that you do not come into the time of testing” on the Mount of Olives just before his death. He tells them twice so they do not forget.

I’ve never liked this kind of testing language mostly because of the way preachers hold it over people. Someone goes through a rough time and a preacher is quick to say, “God is testing you.” “How do you know?” I always think to myself.

The idea that God makes bad things happen to people just to see how they handle it seems like a sadistic God, not the one of Jesus. But here in Luke's Gospel, it's not God doing the testing. It's the devil.

I use "devil" metaphorically. Satan, as a personification of evil, arose in Judaism under the influence of the Iranian dualistic religion and its evil god Ahriman, counterpart to the supreme God of light. Christianity adopted this mythology, in the words of Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, "as a way of expressing its conviction that evil. . . was more than the accumulation of individual human sins."¹ In other words it was a way of observing and describing the human condition as we find it - that human beings seem compelled by forces and powers much larger than ourselves - forces and powers that shape us beyond our own choosing.

We started unpacking one of those forces in the Presbytery meeting that some of us attended this week on the topic of racial bias. One of the pastors in my small group talked about how she labored to find a doll with dark complexion to put in the manger one year for the Christmas pageant. A second grader, Haitian-American, came up to look in the manger, saw the brown baby doll and asked, "Who's that?" "That's the baby Jesus," the pastor said. "That can't be Jesus," the child said. "Jesus is white."

Now it would be tempting to say that this child's racial bias is not the product of some intangible forces of evil, but rather with choices made in this child's life. If someone had just taught them different from an early age, then they wouldn't demonstrate that bias. But researchers on unconscious bias have demonstrated the ways in which all of us are affected by racism regardless of our individual choices. Harvard has created a test that you can take online to discover the depth of your own unconscious bias as it relates to race. They have demonstrated how all of us, regardless of race, have consistent, negative views against people of color.²

This research is not new. Part of what made the case for the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* court decision that overthrew the legal basis for separate but equal was research done by the husband-wife psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark. The Clarks offered dolls to black children. The dolls were identical except for color. In the test, almost all of the children, ages 3-7, readily identified the race of the dolls. But when asked which they preferred, the majority selected the white doll and attributed positive characteristics to it. Segregation harms black children, the researches concluded, because it makes them feel inferior, less than.³

We can't just choose not to be racist in a society built on racism. We can't just choose not to be influenced and governed by forces much larger than any of us as

¹ Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2004, p. 127.

² See research on Implicit Bias pulled together by the Kirwan Institute, <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/researchandstrategicinitiatives/#implicitbias> . Links to the different tests conducted by Harvard can be found here - <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/> .

³ I was reminded of this research during a recent trip to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, TN.

individuals. We can't just choose to improve ourselves individually and expect our personal integrity to win the day. We have to struggle against forces much more powerful than any one of us. Forces intent on dividing and conquering, on tempting and testing, on tearing people down and apart.

Those forces have been active in Baltimore much longer than any of us have been alive. Antonin Pietila's book *Not in My Neighborhood* outlines the historic innovation that took place in Baltimore, finding new ways to segregate people. Our neighborhoods, our institutions, our politics, our culture like our humanity all bear the shaping of forces that predate all of us. And the devil likes it that way. So he can whisper in our ear, "you're safer with people whose skin looks just like yours." So he can whisper in our ear, "Life is easier with people who look like you." So he can whisper in our ear, "Your better off staying in your lanes."

Maybe that's why the devil comes to Jesus when he's alone in the wilderness, standing before his own Kit Kats. You're more vulnerable when you're alone, without your team around you; your team to remind you of who you are. Oh, I know that groups can reinforce hate, and hurt, and exclusion, too. But no resister of evil I've ever known has done so consistently without a community who shaped them, stood by them, had their back. In community you can name your intention to resist the forces opposed to God. You can name your hope to be cleansed from your bias. You can name your desire to be on Jesus' team. You can name your desire not to take what's not yours. In community when you name those things you create accountability all around you.

You're much more vulnerable standing alone before the devil, whispering in your ear power that doesn't belong to you, offering refreshment that's not yours to take, selling protection that can't be guaranteed. You're much more vulnerable when the supports of community, of friendships, of faith fall away. It's in those hidden moments when the devil seems to pick off people when they're most vulnerable.

And maybe that is as true for our city as it is for individuals. We can all go to our corners and create agendas that we think will be best for our city. Business leaders can bring their agenda. Neighborhood activists can bring their agenda. Low-income people from Sandtown-Winchester can bring their agenda. High income people from Roland Park can bring their agenda. That's the way we're used to doing community in Baltimore. From our corners.

But look what happens when the agenda that you shape crosses all of those boundaries on the road to get there. Business leaders are forced to grapple with the pain that is caused when jobs seem to go disproportionately non-city dwellers even as low-skilled workers learn to research employment goals that are rooted in something that is actually achievable by job creators. Law and order citizens are forced to deal with the reality that neighborhoods are not policed equitably even as activists have to concede that citizens do not want to get rid of police, they want to reform their practices. Older citizens are forced to hear the pain of young people profiled by the police, vulnerable to the drug dealers, even as young people learn the disappointment of their elders who survived Jim Crow only to see their children and grandchildren failing to thrive.

A community is created to hold each other accountable. A team to keep us all honest about what God requires from each of us. Because Jesus is the only one who can resist the devil alone. He's the only one who can honor the commandments when the devil comes testing in the wilderness. He's the only one who can remember who he is without his team behind him.

The rest of us, well, we desperately need each other to resist the devil's whispers that come in the sounds of our own voices, alone, justifying our crimes. We need each other's voices to shape us into little boys and girls who see Jesus in every color baby lying in the manger, in every child walking down the street, in every neighborhood of our city, in every soul that God has created. We need each other to stay on Jesus' team, to feed each other the right bread that satisfies, the right wine that gladdens our heart. We need each other.