

First Sun. of Lent (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
February 13, 14, 2016

Today is the first official day of Lent! The past few days were sort of a 'warm-up' to the entire Season. Immediately, on this First Sunday, we hear of temptation. Not surprising, I guess, because the entire Bible begins with a story about 'temptation'. "*You can eat from any tree in the garden that you want, but don't eat from the tree in the center of the garden.*" (Genesis). While Jesus is tempted at the start of his public life, he does not sin. Just last weekend we heard St. Paul tells us that Jesus is like us in all things but sin.

The temptations Jesus experienced were to personal power, to accumulation of kingdoms, and to the desires of the flesh "*turn these stones into bread give in to your hunger.*" "*Jump off the tower of the Temple*" "*Bow to me and you can have all the kingdoms you see.*" Again, not surprising! We experience the same temptations giving in to urges of the flesh, accumulating stuff, and having power and control over others. We are tempted to eat too much, or drink too much; to misuse drugs. We are tempted to violate boundaries in the area of sex, or by stealing and cheating from others. Not only do we have these temptations, we also give in to them. Many have so much stuff that they need to build on to their house, and even rent storage spaces. And, it is always tempting to have people 'beholden' to us. While we 'root for' and 'cheer on' the underdog, we don't like to be the underdog ourselves. We like to be 'on top', the one in control.

What is interesting to me is that we all know about these kinds of temptations. But there are some temptations that we are not so aware of There are things that exert great pressure over us, and that have great influence on us and about which we seem to be completely unaware. For example,

-it is easy to become satisfied with 'not being worse than the next guy'. There is the temptation to feel I am okay if I can find someone who is a bigger drunk than I am, swears more than I do, or cheats his neighbor more than I do. And I can always find someone like this to compare myself to. It even feels good to find someone like this so that I don't 'look so bad' because I know someone who is worse.

-at the other end of the spectrum, there are some who are careful not to 'look too holy' or 'too good', They don't want to appear better than others, 'holier than thou'..

In both of these examples, we use others as our measuring sticks. And most often we are not even aware we are doing this. It is not how much I drink, or how much I gamble or cheat because I know someone who drinks, gambles and cheats more. I resist going to church during the week, or every Sunday, because no one else in the neighborhood does. I resist saying something when unfair judgments are made at work or at a party, for fear of seeming 'above or better' than others. I resist saying "No" to one of my

children or grandchildren, because other parents are letting their children participate. But other people are not to be our measuring sticks. The only criteria against which to measure ourselves is the person of God. How does God want me to be? How can I be more like Jesus? Even, how can I be as much like Jesus as possible?

Today's culture is such a strong influence on us that we are not even aware that it is affecting us. We must stop letting this happen.

Here I walk into troubled waters: I watched some of the 'after Super-Bowl game rituals' last weekend. To win a Super Bowl is a big deal: many of the star players may be really nice guys. No question about that. But the reverence given to the trophy was 'over the top' for me. It was somewhat like honoring the Holy Grail itself. Many receive Holy Communion with less honor many walk into church and enter a pew with less awareness of greatness and less honor for sacred space than they do walking on the gridiron or the wooden hoops court. And for some the gridiron and the wooden court are treated as more sacred than the space for prayer. And we are not even aware that this is what we do, that this has happened to us.

Temptation today is about more than the obvious things. Temptation today is about the things that get beyond us, that we don't think about anymore as important. We say, 'what is it to you?', or 'what I am doing is not affecting anyone else'. But really it is. There is very little I do or don't do that doesn't eventually affect you. And if I think it doesn't, I need to wake up! Even what I do in secret molds me, and sooner or later affects those with whom I relate. And over a period of time a culture is created that affects everyone. What once was considered sinful, seems quite acceptable today. It is the subtlety of temptation and sin that is our downfall.

Pope Francis has said, "I ask myself: am I a Christian by fits and starts, or am I a Christian full-time? Our culture of the fleeting, the passing, the relative, also takes its toll on the way we live our faith. God asks us to be faithful to him, daily, in our everyday life."

But Pope Francis also reminds us that "In his mercy, God never tires of stretching out his hand to lift us up, to encourage us to continue our journey, to come back and tell him of our weakness, so that he can grant us his strength. This is the real journey: to walk with the Lord always, even at moments of weakness, even in our sins. Never to prefer a makeshift path of our own. That kills us."

We have the next 40 days to examine temptation in our lives. Give some serious thought to the temptations you know about because they are so evident, and especially give even more serious thought to the temptations you are currently oblivious to. Call on the name of the Lord to guide you through these days of examination Re-Discover Jesus!