



“Cherrypicking”

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Scripture (CEB):

Luke 4:1-13

4 Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. **2** There he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and afterward Jesus was starving. **3** The devil said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

4 Jesus replied, “It’s written, *People won’t live only by bread.*”

5 Next the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. **6** The devil said, “I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It’s been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. **7** Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours.”

8 Jesus answered, “It’s written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*”

9 The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from here; **10** for it’s written: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you* **11** and *they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone.*”

12 Jesus answered, “It’s been written, *Don’t test the Lord your God.*” **13** After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity.

Sermon:

Everybody does it. But mostly, I hear about it from someone who is angry at me, or someone who has been hurt by it.

“It” is “cherrypicking the scriptures”.

Now don't get me wrong. I love cherries. I love scripture, at least some of it. But folks throw the term “cherrypicking” around when they are fighting over Scripture. They pull out the scripture that they want to use to prove their point. Many of us are familiar with the “clobber passages” used against the GLBTQIA community to cast them out of the church, to judge and condemn them and their life and their love.

Not too long ago, I shared with all of you the immensely frustrating experience of sitting with a person who wielded scripture like a hammer to smash this church and its generous, loving, welcoming ways. And oh yeah, it was used to smash apart my vocation, my ordination, my calling from God, confirmed by you when you installed me as your pastor and teacher in 2002, and then reconfirmed that call in 2012.

It was distressing. Because when he quoted chapter and verse to invalidate this church and me, I could not get him to listen to my chapter and verse, which validates you and me!

This, is “cherrypicking”. And as I said before, everybody in church circles does it. Some do it with scripture, others with church documents; books of discipline or books of order, Vatican II documents, encyclicals, the writing of John Calvin, or Martin Luther...on and on and on.

We use it to study, to inform, to engage.
It is dangerous, often.

In this mystical symbolic piece of scripture that Mary read to us this morning, Jesus and the great Tempter are going around and around.

Cherrypicking.
Satan says one thing, (from Scripture, let us be clear). And Jesus replies with another Scripture, refuting the first one.

It annoyed the hell out of me at first. Both of them doing this thing I despise...
cherrypicking.

But scripture isn't simple, or easy. And right away, as we dig into this text, we have to realize...nobody was there to record this exchange between the Satan and Jesus.

So why is this story here, in the gospel of Luke, and in the gospel of Matthew, and a briefer version in Mark?

For that matter, why isn't it in the gospel of John?

It's not about cherrypicking. It's not about who knows scripture better!

It is about being tempted: to do, or be, something that is not God centered, not focused on a life of loving God, and listening for God in that life you have.

For their own reasons, Luke and Matthew and Mark decide to begin the story of Jesus' ministry with this period of fasting, praying and tempting in the wilderness. Alone for 40 days, he is sorting things out...

We might call it a period of "discerning".

In the contemplative traditions of Christian prayer, discernment is hugely important. Before one moves into action...one is called to deep discerning prayer...silence and stillness, listening for God's voice above the cacophony of our busy minds and our human communities.

In the Jesuit tradition, within Roman Catholicism, you are asked to ponder your choices, and feel, listen deeply within, for something they call the experience of "desolation" or "consolation".

Desolation leaves you feeling unsatisfied, lost, confused, adrift, sad.

Consolation brings peace, a sense of rightness, of calm, of loving assurance.

You can make lists, you can put plus or minus signs next to your lists; you can try out each choice for days at a time, and listen carefully to your heart and mind as you live into that choice; you can read scripture; and talk to a spiritual director or guide...these are all tools of the work of discernment.

And it takes time. You just can't hurry discernment.

Maybe, just maybe, Jesus was in the desert, fasting and praying for 40 days because he was deeply seeking a spirit of discernment, struggling with the choices before him, struggling with the voices in his head and heart with their competing messages.

And you can name those voices if you want, call one the "Satan". And the other, the voice of God in sacred scripture.

For my own discernment, I might name one the voice of Cowardice, and the other the voice of Courage, because these are two of the great competing voices in my life and my periods of discernment.

We all have them.

So, here again, the gospels show us that Jesus shares in our humanity. The life of every human includes being tempted, includes the reality of having to choose. Choose how we will live, choose whom we will serve. Choose how we will love, choose what we will love. Choose what we will call “sacred scripture” and what we will not.

Maybe as we go through Scripture we should be discerning there also...we don't want to “cherrypick” just to bludgeon others with our point of view.

But we do want our sacred text to help us discern how to be filled with God's spirit, God's vision for creation, God's love and mercy.

1. Jesus chose texts that show us how he oriented his life...trusting that his life was held in God's hands at all times...in hunger and in need.
2. That God indeed was God of his life, and he would not presume to a power he did not have, put himself in the center of his life, rather...God would be the center of his life.
3. And no, he would not presume to know the mind of God, but he would trust in God at all times.

So, he chooses:

- a. **Luke 4:4 Deut 8:3**
- b. **Luke 4:8 Deut 6:13**
- c. **Luke 4:12 Deut 6:16**

And I choose too.

- The great commandment: in Mark 12:28-34
- The power of being healed, the freedom of knowing one is worthy: in Luke 13:10-17
- And the call to service that is the call to follow Jesus: in Matthew 25:31-35
- And the vision of the healing of the whole creation in: Revelation 21:1-5

We all must make big decisions within our lives, but as people of faith, we ask for God's guiding Spirit in those decisions.

In following Jesus as our teacher and our Lord, we realize that we too need solitude, and prayer; scripture and a spirit of discernment.

Jesus spent 40 days, a mystical number itself, in prayer and fasting, discerning.

His experience guided his life for three challenging years of service, into Jerusalem, into suffering and death on a Roman cross, and into the glory of the resurrection.

Jesus is our model of discernment, and of trust, and of power. Let us follow him, through Lent, to the promise of Easter.