

**St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018**

Temptation is an Issue of the Heart James 1:13-15

It has probably been around as long as the game. The batter swings the bat to loosen the muscles. He knocks the weight off the bat, walks to the box, scrapes at the dirt with his cleats, pivots on the balls of his feet, taps the plate with the bat, adjusts his feet one more time, and makes the sign of the cross before settling into his stance.

In the classic horror movie, the damsel in distress plays with the cross on the chain around her neck as evil closes in; the hero holds up a cross as the demon takes form only feet away.

At the dedication of a new home or business, people might ask their pastor to come and bless the new beginning in the Name of God, typically making the sign of the cross.

Some people carry a "cross in my pocket".

To what end these gestures? A lucky rabbit's foot to keep the evil, the bad luck, away?

From where comes the most dangerous evil on the Christian's journey home to heaven? Is the most dangerous evil on the outside, or does it perhaps come from within?

Before Martin Luther met the real Jesus on the pages of Scripture, he tried to make himself "holy enough to satisfy an angry God" by fleeing from the evil in the world and into the self-denying life of a monk. But listen to his words after Jesus freed him from this flawed approach to godly living: "For we are not made for fleeing human company but for living in society and sharing (the struggle of) good and evil... We must be ready to live among wicked people, and there everyone must be ready to prove his holiness instead of becoming impatient and running away... It does not help you at all to run away from other people; for within you are still carrying the same old scoundrel, the lust and evil appetite that clings to your flesh... Even if you are all alone, with the door locked, you still cannot deny your father and mother; nor can you discard you flesh and blood... You have no call to pick up your feet and run away, but to stay put, to stand and battle against every kind of temptation with patience to see it through and to triumph."

Martin Luther understood well the battle with temptation and he would echo our theme for Ash Wednesday worship based on our texts:

TEMPTATION IS AN ISSUE OF THE HEART:

MY HEART THAT BETRAYS ME, AND GOD'S HEART THAT SAVES ME.

1. MY HEART THAT BETRAYS ME

A. IT IS HUNGRY

What is the best strategy for catching a largemouth bass? The old-timers would say, "The fastest way to the heart of a bass is through his stomach. If he's hungry, he'll bite!" Friends, it never ceases to AMAZE me what a bass will strike at when hungry!

As goes the largemouth bass, so goes the human heart. If it is hungry, it will bite! The only problem with that comparison for the fisherman is that there are times when that bass isn't

hungry and it wants to bite. The only problem with that comparison for the Christian is that the human heart is ALWAYS hungry and it will ALWAYS bite.

When I attend the birthday party of a one-year who is “as cute as a bug’s ear” as my mom always said, and when I survey the food and the amazing cake, which piece of cake does my sinful nature always want? Yep, the biggest one. And it doesn’t matter how cute the kid is! My sinful nature is always hungry ...and it wants to bite! Your sinful nature is always hungry and WANTS to bite! God says so, and you and I know so.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination (leaning) of the human heart is evil from childhood.”

You see, a part of me always wants the biggest piece.

What is YOUR pet sin? What would it take to get YOU to bite? How many pictures off the internet would I have to flash onto the screens before your sinful nature would bite? Couldn’t help but look? Couldn’t help but chew?

Let us be careful how quickly we answer! Do we remember when Jesus challenged his fellow Jews in his Sermon on the Mount?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder’ ...But I tell you that anyone who is angry will be subject to judgment. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor.’ But I tell you, love your enemy...pray for those who persecute you.”

The sinful nature is hungry. Sins of thought come easily. Unchecked, the thoughts become words and actions. Unrepented of, those sins kill us! Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

B. IT IS SELFISH

The sinful nature is also selfish.

When bass aren’t hungry, there are other ways to get them to bite! They are territorial, especially during spawning season in early June, and they don’t like to be surprised. All you need to do then is to invade their space, get in their face and enjoy the show! A little top water action or a shallow diver...good to go!

Like the largemouth bass, the human heart, by nature, is also territorial, self-focused, quick to “right a wrong directed my way”—quick to rush to judgment; quick to snap!

- “Why did you say it THAT way? What are you implying?”
- “I don’t want to work with him. He makes me look bad with his college education, designer clothes and cheery sense of humor!”
- “Who invited HER? I don’t really like her! I planned this event and she is ruining everything!”

Bass are so predictable when you invade their space because it is instinctive. God wired them that way for survival! All good! 😊 We are so predictable in this way because sin is engrained

in us—woven through the fabric of our being. And WE wired ourselves that way the day we chose to “dethrone” God from our hearts in the Garden out of selfishness. NOT good! 😞

The sinful nature is selfish. Sins of thought come easily. Unchecked, the thoughts become words and actions. Unrepented of, those sins kill us! Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

APPLICATION Are you ever tempted to blame God when tempted? You know, “The woman YOU gave me, Lord!”

- “God, if you hadn’t let me lose my job, I wouldn’t even be thinking about underreporting my income for taxes.”
- “God, why couldn’t you have given me a nice husband like hers? Then I wouldn’t be tempted to despise the one I got!”
- “Lord, if you hadn’t taken my spouse from me I wouldn’t be so depressed and mean-spirited.”
- “God, if you hadn’t put these strong desires in me, well, we wouldn’t be having these problems...”

Bottom line, do we ever think to ourselves, “God, you need to step up your game here. Life isn’t so good right now. If you are working in all things for good, I ain’t seein’ it.”

“When tempted, no one should say ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone, but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desires and enticed.”

Why did God create us with desires? Are those desires ever the problem? Someone once said that God created us with desires so that we would have a balanced life and would experience all the blessings he planned in his creation.

Then how did these desires get to be such a challenge...causing so much hurt? The sin inside of me really IS a big deal, isn’t it? Temptation REALLY is an issue of my heart, my heart that betrays me!

2. GOD’S HEART THAT SAVES ME

A. HE IS SERIOUS ABOUT OUR SIN

Sin IS a big deal, friends! My sin hurts you and it hurts my relationship with God. Sin angers our God and he is serious in his dealing with it! How do we KNOW? (Hold up the cross) A wise theologian once said, “Learn to see what the wrath of God IS, by learning what the wrath of God DOES.”

My friends, sin is a serious issue of the human heart...but it is also a serious issue of God’s Heart! God is love and God is holy. God MUST punish the sinner for sin; but God is also “wired” to love the sinner unconditionally, putting us first! So what does his love look like? (Hold up the cross) God so loved that he gave his Son that whoever believes...will be saved. So serious is our sin that the cross HAD to come! So serious is God’s love that the cross had to happen!

What a BIG heart in our God; SO different from ours! Focused on US he planned the cross and sent his Son.

B. IT'S HOW HE ROLLED, IT'S HOW HE DIED

And as the Father, so the Son! SO serious about our sin! It is how Jesus rolled! At one time in his ministry he was riding an amazing ground swell of popular support...so much so that the Jewish leaders began to plot his downfall and his death, and so much so that Jesus had to begin to lay it down pretty heavily with his followers exactly why he had come! He was serious about our sin! Punishment was required. And he was God's Lamb. HE was God's love! So there would be a cross! It's how he rolled; it is why he would die.

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything written about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."

The disciples did not understand any of this. They did not know what he was talking about.

Think how tempting were the temptations for Jesus about this time! The cross would be physical agony; the cross WAS spiritual warfare with Satan every day of Jesus' life—"Give it up, brother! It's too hard."; the cross would be HELL...literally...as Jesus would be separated from his Father and ALL of his Father's blessings! And God's Word tells us that Jesus was tempted like us in every way!

- "You are right, Peter, my friend! This shouldn't happen to me! Thanks for being a friend and saying it." "No! *Get behind me, Satan!*"
- "Satan could give me all the kingdoms of the world and I wouldn't have to die." "No! *It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.*"
- "Come down from the cross if you are the Christ." "I am the Christ and I AM coming down!" "No. *As a lamb before the shearers is silent, so I will not open my mouth.*"

My friends, God's heart saved us! It is how he rolls! He placed US first, in spite of the cost, and he died for our sin. He placed us first that he might fill our hearts with his presence and with HIS kind of love—a love for God and for others that we might fight against the temptations from without, and declare war on our hearts that betray from within!

CONCLUSION The cross...in baseball...in the face of evil...in my pocket...around my neck? To what end? When Martin Luther taught God's people to pray, he said this: "In the morning when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say: In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Prepared by Pastor Nate Strobel
414-422-0320, ext. 293
nstrobel@stpaulmuskego.org