

American Appetites

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Texts: Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17

Lent Disciplines

The appetites of North Americans are a public health crisis as well as an environmental crisis. Over the last 25 years our caloric intake has increased by over 300 calories per day and now more than 68% of us are overweight or obese. Fast food and portion distortion tempt us to eat and drink too much of the wrong foods and too much in general. Not only personal overconsumption in fuel for our bodies, but over consumption of fuel for our cars, homes, and industries is contributing to global climate change. We know that our society has appetites that are out of control in other areas too-- consumer goods, sex, entertainment, drugs--both legal and illegal--screen time. We're gluttons. We look toward examples of success in defeating these cravings, but it's a tough battle to live well in a society with out-of-control appetites. That's our culture's bad news. The church's good news is Lent.

Satan

Our gospel story for the first Sunday in Lent is presented as a face-off between two characters. The temptation to evil that Jesus confronts is personified, or better, vilified, in the character of Satan. This is typical Hebrews stuff. What we might express impersonally in contemporary English was expressed through personification in ancient languages and cultures, especially by the Hebrews. For example, a psalm that I love--psalm 104--celebrates the God of creation, who dwells among the elements, establishes the earth, creates living creatures and generously provides for all donkeys, birds, cattle, coneys, goats, lions, people too: ***These all look to you***

to give them their food in due season;

when you give to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

But the very last verse of psalm 104 is: ***Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul.*** I never feel like blessing the Lord after that verse. It seems like calling the God who created a world of good, to now destroy some of the bad apples--the sinners, the wicked. But before we discard the Bible, or ignore this weird story about Jesus and Satan facing off in the wilderness, notice that this is Hebrew convention.

In English, after praising the God who created a world of beauty and fruitfulness we would pray--*Let sin be consumed from the earth, and let wickedness be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul.* In a similar way, the New Testament occasionally--not very often, but sometimes--uses this older convention of speaking about evil directly as Satan--a character in the story--not a person exactly, but someone. So don't get too hung up on the ontology of Satan. The point is to notice the evil in our lives and in our world that was just blending into the fabric of daily life. Perhaps typical American appetites are more dangerous than we realize. Reading the Bible reveals that we're not just facing spiritual drift or even a moral dilemma, but Satan himself!

Appetite-Approval-Ambition

A Christian friend of mine in town here reminds me nearly every year as Lent begins that the temptations of Jesus are about appetite, approval and ambition. The temptation to turn stones to bread is about Jesus' appetite...and ours. The temptation to hurl himself from the temple is about approval--does God care enough to save him? Will God save us? The temptation to worship Satan in exchange for all the nations of the world is about ambition, having it all. Appetite, approval, and ambition--aren't these especially American temptations--not only for national figures, but for us as well?

It's true that appetite, approval, and ambition can be our downfall. This year, though I'm turning this alliterative interpretation on it's head. Because I don't believe there is a literal Satan who slaps us with temptation from out of the blue. The God who formed humanity from the earth, created us with some of these very cravings--appetite is biological; approval is psychological--we need to know that somebody loves us as we are. Ambition? I guess we're not all ambitious. But most scholars of the humanities and our own Christian tradition indicate that a vocation, an ambition of some kind is within us, even if it takes a lifetime to discover it. The God who created us included appetites, approval and ambition in our design.

Now, I'm not saying that we just indulge our appetites, our need for approval, our ambitions. But perhaps these need to be re-directed, since they cannot be stamped out and destroyed--the way we would try to destroy a flesh and blood enemy. Think about it.

When Jesus finally says: *away with you, Satan*, and triumphs over his temptations, he hasn't destroyed Satan. And then Jesus heads out of the

wilderness with an appetite for healing and justice; a desire to stand approved before God alone--even if powerful people oppose him; and an ambition to proclaim and embody the kingdom of God, even if means he dies only 5 miles from his birthplace.

Lent Disciplines

During the 40 days of Lent Christians around the world choose spiritual disciplines in order to live more deeply as unique expressions of God's love in the world. Perhaps you've already chosen a spiritual discipline for Lent.

That's great. Now for the other 90% of us, let's take Lent seriously.

Appetite is not just bad news. Appetite and longing are part of our human condition, part of how God created us. I believe it is longing and hunger that ultimately attracts us to God. Sometimes we don't know how hungry for God we are until we are offered the bread of life and the cup of forgiveness. In the Bible, sometimes being hungry--having an appetite--is a good thing because when we are empty, God can fill us with good things. *God satisfies the thirsty and the fills the hungry with good things--Ps 107.* When we're hungry we receive our food and every good gift with gratitude. Woe to the brother or sister who loses their appetite.

Lent 2017 is an opportunity to be honest about our American appetites. How much unnecessary fuel consumption? How many empty calories are making us sluggish and sick? What cravings are we indulging that are actually ruining our lives rather than restoring our lives? When we accumulate all the stuff on our wishlists and virtual grocery carts, will we be any happier, any more peaceful, any more loving, any more like Christ?

There are cards beneath your chairs that you can use this morning to just name the the ungodly appetite that needs to be redirected in your life. On the reverse side of the card you can write a practice that will help you redirect your appetite this Lenten season. But even if you don't yet have some specific way to redirect that appetite during Lent, that's OK. Just seeing the appetite for what it is and knowing that you can choose how you'll respond is powerful. It is one of the unique capacities of human beings--to choose and to choose well.

Today, to begin redirecting our American appetites, we invite you to a meal. It's just a taste--a small piece of bread, a sip from a small cup, just enough to

whet your appetite for God, to give you a taste of God's love for your body, just enough to begin fueling your ambition for the kingdom of God.

Table Grace

When you come for the bread or the cup, you can leave your card in the basket near the servers. What if this year during Lent we confessed our American Appetites that are out of control and became hungry in the Biblical sense. Jesus said: ***Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will be satisfied.*** What if this year during Lent we redirected one of our appetites toward God's justice and healing? What might God do with a congregation that had that kind of appetite?

I'll end today with one of Macrina Wiederkehr's poems about the vicious cycle of filling the hunger in our lives with false gods and the power of the true God to save us. It speaks to our American Appetites, our need for Approval, and our Ambitions. And offers us a testimony of hope.

The God I was trying to love
was too demanding
And so I looked for other gods
who would ask less of me
And in unconverted corners of my heart
I found them
waiting to be adored
asking nothing of me
yet making me a slave.
Possessions, recognition, power!
I bowed before them but my hunger
only deepened.

The God I was trying to escape
was too loving
so God sent me a brother, Jesus
to be my Lord
and to free me from my false gods
But this Lord Jesus
preached a hard gospel
and so I turned to other lords
and Jesus was not my Lord
--except on Sundays for a little while

because it is the custom
for those who wish to bear the name
Christian
to gather for worship
on that day--

But Jesus was not my Lord
And my idol-filled life
was a banner that proclaimed:
Jesus is not Lord!

The God I was trying to love
was too loving
and too demanding
so God gathered up my false gods
my reputation, my pride
my honor and prestige
my possession, my success
my own glory
my time
even my friends.

God gathered up all these lords of mine.
God gathered up all my lies
and held them close to me
so close, I lost all sight
of my true God for a while.

But my true God never lost sight of me
And in that lies my salvation
for in one desperate moment
smothered by gods who couldn't save me
I prayed for a God who would
fill my lies with truth.
I prayed for a God who would
expect something of me,
a God who would be too loving
and too demanding
to be patient with my false gods any longer.

God heard that prayer

and loved me
I was given back to myself,
and taught
how to answer my own prayer
so that with other believers
I might again proclaim:

Jesus Christ is Lord!

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.