

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT  
Year C  
February 21, 2010  
Luke 4:1-13  
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Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Duluth, Minnesota

Do you ever wonder if the life you're living is "too trivial to be true"?

"... too trivial to be true." It's not my phrase. It comes from Paul Scherer by way of Dallas Willard. The notion that our way of life might be "too trivial to be true" strikes at the heart of the human condition, that all our strivings might be vanity.

Henri Nouwen writes about "the temptation of compulsiveness":

Don't you often hope: "May this book, idea, course, trip, job, country, or relationship fulfill my deepest desire." But as long as you are waiting for that mysterious moment, you will go on running helter-skelter, always anxious and restless, always lustful and angry, never fully satisfied. You know that this is the compulsiveness that keeps us going and busy but at the same time makes us wonder whether we are getting anywhere in the long run. This is the way to spiritual exhaustion and burnout. This is the way to spiritual death. (*Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, 32)

A recent column of "For Better or For Worse" by Lynn Johnston depicts the temptation of compulsiveness well: A woman is leaning on her dresser, chin in her hand, looking at herself in the mirror. She thinks to herself, "Well, I figured out something this week. I'm too insecure! I don't need a man . . . I need self-confidence! I need to be happy with ME!" Standing up straight, her index finger pointing to the ceiling, she declares to herself: "I'm going home as a totally new person and there's only one way to do it!" In the last frame, the woman has grabbed her purse and is heading out the door: "Have my hair dyed."

As Nouwen wrote: "May this book, idea, course, trip, job, country, or relationship fulfill my deepest desire." Or as the woman in the comic strip concludes: "Have my hair dyed."

Do you ever wonder if the life you're living is "too trivial to be true"?

I wonder if that's what Adam and Eve felt with life in the garden. Everything seemed to be going well until the serpent came along and suggested there might be more to life—much more: they could be "as God, knowing good and evil." And so they ate of the forbidden fruit, hoping—expecting—for more than what God had already given them. Instead, what they came to know was living in denial of their culpability, blaming the other, and separation from God. The story describes our human condition.

But if the temptation of compulsiveness, as Henri Nouwen puts it, drives us to despair, the opposite is malaise and sloth. Snoopy expresses it perfectly in the comic strip “Classic Peanuts,” by Charles Schultz, in the same paper as the “For Better or For Worse” strip I quoted earlier:

Snoopy is lying on his back, stretched out on the ground, thinking to himself: “Yesterday I was a dog. . . . Today I’m a dog. . . .” He picks himself up from the ground and begins to walk ahead, “Tomorrow I’ll probably *still* be a dog. . . .” He sits down with a great “Sigh.” In the last frame, Snoopy is lying back down on the ground, this time on his back with his head on a rock “There’s so little hope for advancement!”

I wonder if these two comic strips paint a portrait of the two opposite ends of the human condition: the temptation of compulsiveness—“have my hair dyed”—on the one hand, and sloth and malaise—“There’s so little room for advancement”—on the other.

Jesus’ temptation by the devil in the wilderness is a temptation to *deny his true identity*, or, more accurately, for Jesus to *define for himself*, his identity. The devil does not deny that Jesus is the Son of God: His seductive, alluring probing, “*If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread*” or “*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here . . .*” would be more accurately rendered “*Since you are the Son of God . . .*” The devil does not deny that Jesus is the Son of God. Rather, the devil is luring Jesus to define for himself what it *means* to be the Son of God, that Jesus might take matters into his own hands, that he might satisfy his physical hunger pangs, that he might exercise worldly power and authority, that he might force God’s hand. Rather, Jesus chooses that path that God has laid out for him, the path of obedience, the path of servanthood, the path of suffering, for the sake of his beloved humanity.

Every day of our lives, we as human beings are tempted to define our own identities. On the one hand, we fall into the temptation of compulsiveness, the trap to try to be as God, to make a name for ourselves, to “have my hair dyed.” On the other hand, we recognize the hopelessness of trying to make something of ourselves and to fall into sloth, malaise, and despair, and to bemoan, like Snoopy, “There’s so little room for advancement.”

I began my sermon with the question, “Do you ever wonder if the life you’re living is *too trivial to be true*? Dallas Willard poses that question in the early chapters of his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (24). The Church Council here at Concordia has chosen this book to read through this year and to discuss successive chapters at the beginning of each monthly meeting. Willard wonders if the lives most Christians live today are too trivial to be true. He quotes Flora Wuellner: “The church has become an organization of well-meaning idealists, working for Christ but far from his presence and power” (22). Willard insists that life in Christ—discipleship—is the way of being formed into the likeness of Christ, to be the light of the world, to be the salt of the earth.

The Apostle Paul admonishes us: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called . . .” (Ephesians 4:1). Our

identity in Christ is that we are children of God, called to be disciples, “prisoners in the Lord,” as Paul says. The temptation we face every day is to deny that identity—on the one hand to make our own way, and, on the other, to give in to sloth, malaise, and despair.

As we enter into the season of Lent, we are invited to enter more deeply into the life of discipleship, to be formed more and more into the likeness of Christ. Therein lies *true* life, *authentic* life.

Do you ever wonder if the life you’re living is “too trivial to be true”? There is nothing trivial about life in Christ.

Thanks be to God!