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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; **Matthew 4:1-11**

## IDENTITY THEFT

We are warned a lot these days to be on the alert against theft--not so much the stealing of our wallets or our cars, but the theft of our identities. There are people who would use your personal information, your Social Security number for example, to access all your personal accounts, and could then assume your identity in order to defraud you. And so we are told to be vigilant in guarding our personal data--to shred important documents, to refuse to give our personal data to unknown people over the phone because there are those people out there who would steal our identities for harmful intentions.

Identity theft is not just a criminal issue. It is also a theological issue. And it is the core issue we are warned about in our scriptures today.

Clearly, both of our passages today speak to the issue of temptation. We read the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and of their temptation to eat the forbidden fruit. The gospel reading from Matthew then gives us the story about Jesus facing temptation in the wilderness.

Now we tend to have a certain concept in our minds when we think about temptation. We often think of temptations as behaviors we shouldn't do or the acquisition of things we shouldn't have: things like eating unhealthy foods, sexual relationships that are not part of a covenant of fidelity, the pursuit of money or power, the temptation to steal something we want or to buy things we can't afford. All of these are indeed classic temptations people have experienced since the dawn of time. But what if we thought about these behaviors this way: what if they are not the real temptation we face but are merely the *symptoms* of a deeper

temptation. The true temptation we experience in life is what Jesus was tempted with in the wilderness. We are tempted to forget our identity, to forfeit our identity.

In the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the devil is trying to steal something from Jesus. But to understand this, we have to first recall what just took place immediately before Jesus heads out into the wilderness. If you were to open your Bible to the passage we read from Matthew's gospel about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and then look at the story that comes immediately before it, you would discover that it is the story of Jesus' baptism. At Jesus' baptism, the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus, and then the voice of God declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus' identity as God's son is publicly declared at his baptism.

And then we are told that immediately following his baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness where he is tempted. And what is he tempted with? The text tells of three temptations: to turn stones to bread, to throw himself off the temple roof to test God, to gain power over all the kingdoms of the world. But these are not the heart of the temptation placed before Jesus. The real temptation is found in the Tempter's words. The Tempter says to Jesus, "*If* you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread . . . *if* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for God will command angels to bear you up . . . *if* you fall down and worship me, all these kingdoms I will give you." *If? If?* But we already know that Jesus is God's Son. We just heard God say so in the baptism.

The temptation put before Jesus is to doubt his identity or, worse yet, to forfeit his God-given identity. The Tempter seeks to steal from Jesus his trust in an identity that has just been declared, and then to encourage Jesus to take up another false identity instead. This is what Jesus steadfastly resists. There is no *if* for Jesus. He knows who he is.

Identity theft surfaces again in the Genesis story about Adam and Eve. Once again we have a tempter who entices the man and the woman to forget their identity. They are the creature and God is their Creator. But the Tempter encourages them to steal an identity that is not theirs. Do you remember what the Tempter said when he invites them to eat the forbidden fruit? He says to them, "when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God.*" You will be like God. But they are *not* God!

Scripture is warning us in these stories that the greatest temptation we face is to forget or deny our identity--the identity we have been given at our own baptisms. When you and I were baptized, we were given an identity: children of God and disciples of Christ. We are *children* of God. *We* are not God but the beloved *children* of God. We are disciples of Christ--those who are called to live in the example of Jesus.

And yet, every day of our lives we face a great many temptations that invite us to forget or to forfeit our identity. They come in all shapes and all sizes, sometimes even packaged up in forms we think of as good. When the love of country or family or the pursuit of our career becomes our greatest allegiance or when these loyalties invite us to adopt values contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we are facing an identity crisis. Over-eating or relationship infidelities are indeed temptations many people face, but at their core, they are about defacing the identity God has given us in our baptisms as we attempt to fill our emptiness with things other than God. And as we cram one more beautiful item into our already full homes and closets, perhaps the temptation isn't that we have spent too much money or over-indulged ourselves, but that we have forfeited our identity in worshipping and serving things other than God.

When we say to ourselves that we just can't forgive that person for what they did, we are forgetting our identity as disciples of Christ. Because that's what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Not working at forgiving, is simply not an option we get to pick from a menu of things. It's part of our identity as a follower of Christ. Guess what? We've got to put in the work! The same with loving our enemies. Not an option! When we decide that we don't have to care about certain people because they did something we don't like or because they aren't like us or because they are from another country or of another religion and therefore they don't deserve our care or compassion, we are forgetting our identity as disciples of Christ.

And sometimes we are a lot like Adam and Eve in that we attempt to take on an identity that was never meant for us. And so we use this earth like a commodity for our own exploitation with little regard for the consequences to others who live upon it. We think of the money we have in the bank as "ours" to do with as we like. We buy whatever we want thinking it's ok as long as we can afford it. And we place our trust in ourselves and our bank accounts and live crazy schedules and work long hours because ultimately we believe that our well-being is up to us. And so we manage our lives carefully, strive for security, and attempt to stay in control. And in doing so, we have become our own god. "Worship and serve only me," says the one true God.

The greatest temptation we face is forgetting who we are. We are children of God. We are disciples of Christ. This is our identity. But we let it get stolen from us. Sometimes we hand it over without much of a fight at all. And we adopt other false identities--like Consumer, or Successful, or Capable, or Victim, or Worthless.

Lent is a season for returning to God. What that really means is that it is a time for recalling our proper identity and embracing it each and every day. It is said that the great

Protestant reformer Martin Luther would put his hand on his head each morning and say, "I am baptized," as a way of reminding himself each day of his special identity before he went out into the world and faced a barrage of forces tempting him to forget this truth. Every day our identity is challenged. And so we too are invited to recall, to re-remember, who God has already declared us to be. We are children of God. We are disciples of Christ. And our identity is marked by how we radically love, forgive, serve, work for justice, live simply, and honor what is good and true.