

LENT I

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. Matthew 4:11

I have often preached, with this gospel, about the temptations Jesus faces, and what they might have to do with us. But I've come to think that they may not have all that much to do with us, that in fact, this is one of those times when Jesus' divine nature is predominant.

Yes, he is tempted in *every way as we are, yet did not sin*, as the book of Hebrews tells us. That he was tempted at all reveals his humanity, and I'm all for his humanity. But the temptations themselves seem rather alien to us, to me anyway. I've never been tempted to turn stones to bread (well, given my baking deficits, maybe I've done it anyway). I've never been tempted to fling myself off a temple, or to rule all the kingdoms of the world.

These are not everyday temptations. we may interpret them – theologians may interpret them– so that we can translate them into our own lives: the temptation to save the world (stones to bread); the temptation to challenge God to save me, the temptation to power. But I know that I struggle with more immediate and damaging temptations than these.

One of these, a major one, is the temptation to hold a grudge, the temptation to nurture feelings of resentment and rage, the temptation not to forgive.

This sin of mine, this reluctance or apparent inability, sometimes, to forgive, has been much on my mind and heart, and was as I put together the first week's Lenten meditations posted on our website. I found the following poem by Jeffrey McDaniel to include.

The Grudge

I watered the grudge,
not with the fervent devotion
of a nun clutching rosary beads,
not with the destructive clockwork
of a drunk spilling vodka
tumblers on the cactus erupting
through his heart, but I watered it,
went out there at midnight,
with a can of spittle, moon dangling

like a lightbulb from its frail cord,
and I dripped the dark
nourishing fluid into its roots,
my face pulsing like a blister
as the venom petals bloomed.

~Jeffrey McDaniel

Quite a set of images, I thought.

A dictionary definition of forgiveness: *to cease to feel resentment on account of a wrong committed*. That complicates the question, because grudge-bearing is not simply a deal between me and myself, like whether to eat that piece of fudge or not. Someone else, or someone(s) else are involved as well. A wrong has been done. Closing out a grudge is not just closing the lid on the fudge tin. It's a transaction with someone else. Or is it?

Here's a Tibetan Buddhist story. Two monks encounter each other some years after being released from prison where they had been tortured by their captors. *Have you forgiven them?* asks the first. *I will never forgive them? Never!* replies the second. *Well, I guess they still have you in prison, don't they?* the first says.

And ain't that the truth? Being trapped in resentment, anger, and bitterness is spiritual imprisonment.

One of the most dramatic wrongs I've experienced was the murder of my beloved grandmother by robbers, back in 1976. I was named for my grandmother, I loved her very much, and she was my emotional mother in many ways. As some of you know, I've been working on a book of poems about her life, her murder, and the aftermath. So I've been revisiting, among many other questions, the matter of how I feel about her killers.

As providence would have it, at the time of the trial for her murder I was teaching a class of police detectives at U Mass Lowell. I took a couple of weeks off from teaching to attend the trial, and I talked with those officers before and after the trial. Before, I asked whether they thought my mother should attend the trial; she wanted to, and I wasn't sure it was a good idea.

In perhaps my most triumphant teaching moment ever, those police, who as far as literature students went were diamonds in the rough, they said, *well, you've been teaching about closure, about the need to stop reliving a traumatic event. So?*

So, my mother and I went each day of the trial. Afterwards, when I returned to the classroom, and told my detective friends about the outcome: guilty, and a fifty year sentence for the shooter, they asked, *How do you feel now about the death penalty?*

The same as I did before, I told them. *I couldn't be responsible for deciding to take someone else's lilke, so I wouldn't give that responsibility to anyone else, either.* I never felt, as my father confessed to feeling, *like killing those guys*. I didn't feel it or think it: my feelings and my moral convictions were in line.

But as I've been researching and writing my book, I've been wondering how I feel now about those guys who took my grandmother from me.

And here's one poem. Imagine someone asking me questions, and my answers.

Interrogation

*Do you hate them?
I don't know them.
Do you hate them?
The girls were so young.
Do you hate them?
It wasn't personal.
Do you hate them?
They were drunk.
Do you hate them?
Why did they have to
Do you hate them?
She'd just moved Grandpa
Do you hate them?
She was just starting
Do you hate them?
We had to cancel her party.
Do you hate them?
I was named for her.
Do you hate them?
She loved me so much.*

Two of those answers tell, at least partly, how I've come out on this question. *It wasn't personal*. This crime was almost, but not quite, random. The girlfriend of one of the perps knew my grandmother's house, perhaps had done some housework for her, and knew she had plenty of valuable antiques. But most of the six people involved didn't know Granny, had nothing against her, and did not, I believe, intend for her to die. They

were dangerous and they panicked, but they did not act out of personal hate or vengeance. In that sense, it's hard to hate them; though forgiveness may be a stretch for me, I don't nourish a grudge.

But the other thing is this. *She loved me so much*. I was one of her five grandchildren, and I was her favorite. Everybody needs, or at least craves, to be someone's favorite, and I was hers. So in losing her I lost not just a vivid and amazing role model and a generous grandmother, but a sense of being cherished that I didn't find, so much, at home. That was a tremendous loss.

I believe that when a wrong is committed against us, something we find difficult or maybe impossible to forgive, we have always lost something. Perhaps someone has betrayed us and we have lost trust. Perhaps someone has slandered us and we feel we have lost status. Perhaps someone has fired us and we have lost our job; perhaps someone has left us and we have lost a partner. And on and on.

Impersonal injuries may be easier to forgive than those that seem, or are, directed as us in particular. Acts and words that seem intended to hurt or diminish us are easy to brood over and hard to forgive .

A wrong committed against us always involves loss of some kind. Does it help to recognize that, and realize that our anger and sense of grievance may cover a profound sense of grief?

And finally, an inability to forgive imprisons us in an endless cycle of rage and blame. It's spiritually damaging. Forgiveness, as I said to someone at coffee hour recently, *forgiveness is more about us than it is about them*. Easy for me to say, harder for me to remember in my personal struggles.

But when I am able to shed the burden of anger and resentment, a great burden lifts from my heart, *as if the devil has left me and suddenly angels come and wait on me*.

Amen