

Back in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the world was introduced to Geraldine, the wife of a preacher named Reverend Leroy. It was a comedic act by Flip Wilson that spread like wildfire and quickly took on cultural significance that still echoes even today. Now Geraldine was known for doing things that she couldn't really defend – such as buying ANOTHER dress from her favorite store. But of course, no matter how much Reverend Leroy pressed her on her choices, it was never Geraldine's fault. Instead, she would fall back on the now familiar catchphrase – do you know it? – “The Devil made me do it!” And of course, what makes it so hysterical is that we have a sneaking suspicion that the devil didn't really make her do anything. It's just a scapegoat for poor choices.

Now, I'm not suggesting we base our theology on a comedy sketch, but if we turn to what we read in Scripture, we get a very real and clear sense that the Devil really doesn't make anyone do anything. That's far too direct and perhaps I'm naïve, but I tend to think that if people are presented with a choice that is so abundantly and obviously wrong, I hold out hope that they will make the right choice. The pull of evil rarely relies on things that are clearly evil. Rather, evil thrives with a more sleight of hand approach. We are tempted, not so much by things obviously evil, but by things that on the whole seem quite good. Evil enters in when the intentions and means are not as wholesome as what might be desired.

Take the temptation of Christ in today's Gospel. The Devil isn't offering anything inherently bad. Food for the hungry (albeit the hungry one is Jesus himself), the kingdoms of the earth being handed over from the rule of the Devil to Jesus himself, the chance to show to the world the power of God and the faith we can have in God's ability and desire to protect us. These aren't bad things, in and of themselves. We pray for the hungry to be fed and we collect food items to support local agencies like Parker Task Force. We pray each and every time we worship, “Your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We put our faith in God who promises to hold us and keep us by his righteous and all-powerful hand. The problem is, it's easy to become distracted. It's easy to lose focus. That even what seems good, when done in the wrong way or for the wrong reasons, may not always be the best decision.

The season of Lent is a great example of this. It's a time when we are invited into the disciplines of self-reflection, prayer, fasting, and other acts of devotion. But I'm going to suggest, with all kindness and understanding (because I'm guilty of it, as well), that so much of Lent has become what I would call “New Years' Resolution 2.0.” What was supposed to be a time of devotion to God in order that we may grow in faith, trust, and obedience to the will of God, has frequently become a way for us to better ourselves. Not necessarily in our life of faith, but just to be more of the person we want to be. In other words, Lenten practices that are by

all means good, done for our own purposes and our own glory, miss the point of what this season is about.

So when Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread so the poor guy, after 40 days of nothing, can have a bite to eat, he refuses. Because it comes with a catch. “IF you are the Son of God, prove it.” But the moment that Jesus proves what he already knows, the glory of the moment is not directed to God, but to himself. And if the glory is for himself and not for God, then he has no need of reliance upon God. Which is why Jesus sticks to what he knows – that he is the Son of God because God's very word has declared it so. We do not live on our own power, but by the power of God's word of promise. Jesus will continue to turn to this truth throughout the temptation. When he is offered the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshipping the Devil, he turns to God's word. When he is challenged to throw himself down from the temple to show how great God is and how faithful he is, when Scripture is abused and the word of God is thrown out for selfish gain, Jesus remembers who the glory belongs to.

Because the ironic thing in all of this is not that Jesus was tempted to do bad things. The irony is that he will go on to feed the hungry. He will declare that the kingdom of God has come among us, a kingdom that is absorbing all other kingdoms, that all will be made new. And though he will not throw himself off the temple, he will put his life into God's hands, with full faith and confidence that even on the cross, God's word will prevail, and defeat the powers of sin, death, and the devil. Jesus, resting firmly in the promise of God's word, there was nothing the Devil could make him do.

Which is really what the season of Lent is about, right? It's a season that calls us back to our roots, back to the foundation of our faith. That we are created by love and for love by the hand of our creator. That God's word has declared that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. And sometimes, we're not so readily accepting of that. We're tempted to believe we must be more in order to be loved. We're tempted to believe that the better we are, the more deserving of God's love we'll be. Such things, though seemingly good, are merely a trick, leading us away from God's word and relying more on the word of the world or even our own word. The allure of our lives is to be more than we are, forgetting that God is God and we are not. That we are not content with out humanness.

But being human isn't wrong. It isn't even a weakness. It's who God made us to be. And that means, by God's very word, that we are more precious than we can even imagine, more loved than we can fully comprehend. Being human means relying on the grace of God in Christ Jesus that is sufficient for today's needs and all those that lay ahead. It means that in Christ, we can do all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. Sorry, Devil. You can't make us do anything. Thanks be to God! Amen.