



“Be loved. Be kind. Be you.”

Perhaps these words sound familiar you.

They’re on the colorful backpack tags we gave to the kids last fall.

We had a special outdoor service for them --  
 virtually all unvaccinated back then --  
 instead of including it in our Sunday morning services as usual.

That’s one of the reasons I mentioned it in my  
 report/slide show for last week’s Annual Meeting.  
 I concluded that report saying that the Christian life  
 is a matter of trusting that we are loved by God  
 which frees us to share that lovingkindness with others  
 each in our own unique, authentic way.

“Be loved. Be kind. Be you.”

That’s exactly what Jesus does in today’s gospel,  
 the temptation story which always begins the Sundays in Lent.  
 It follows Jesus’ baptism.

We read that several weeks ago (on the First Sunday after the Epiphany.)  
 It’s the dramatic story in which the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus  
 “like a dove” as a voice from heaven declares him God’s “Be-Loved.”

Today’s gospel opens just after the baptism,  
 with Jesus full of the Holy Spirit and led by that Spirit – where?  
 Not to a place of lush perfection.  
 But to the wilderness where it’s easy to lose one’s way.  
 And there he’s tested for forty days,  
 as Moses and the people Israel were tested in the wilderness for forty years.  
 And, yes, as we observe the forty days of Lent.

Please notice what this time of testing is about.  
 Jesus isn’t tempted to do anything all that bad, really.  
 It’s not like the devil is enticing him to rob a bank or axe anyone.  
 I mean, we need “bread” – we need to eat, don’t we?  
 Most of us seem to prefer some kind of order and authority

to chaos and anarchy.

And, finally, we feel responsible for keeping ourselves and our families safe.  
So what's the problem with these so-called temptations?

As much as anything, I think it's that ugly word "if"  
which makes everything conditional, a quid pro quo.  
"IF you're the Son of God," says the devil, waving that stone before Jesus.  
"IF you do this," the devil bargains, then I'll do that.  
"IF you're the Son of God," the devil taunts, then throw yourself  
off the pinnacle to prove it.

But Jesus doesn't have to prove anything to anyone.  
He knows exactly who and *whose* he is.  
He is Be-Loved – no ifs, ands or buts.  
He is loved without condition  
which means he cannot do anything to make himself  
any more beloved of God than he already is.

What Jesus can and does do is this: Be loved. Be kind. Be himself,  
be who God created him to be.

In the public ministry launched at the end of those forty days,  
Jesus doesn't do a thing to try to earn God's favor.  
Oh, he does plenty of things, alright, throughout the action-packed gospel.  
But he does them because he knows that he's loved.  
Jesus knows that he was baptized and led by the Spirit  
to share God's love with those who need it most.

And so Jesus, who refuses to turn stone into bread for the devil,  
feeds the hungry multitudes.  
Jesus, who refuses to turn stone into bread for the devil,  
dines with sinners and all manner of outcasts.  
Jesus, who refuses to turn stone into bread,  
gives his own body to be the Bread of Heaven.

Jesus, who refuses the temporal political power the devil offered,  
shows us the way to God's kingdom  
by practicing radical hospitality and mercy,  
justice and healing, and lovingkindness, for all.

Jesus, who refuses to play the devil's parlor game of throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple, allows himself to be lifted high upon the cross.

Jesus resists all the tests of the devil to show us what it means to "Be Loved," without condition or measure.

This is what we're to be about these forty days of Lent – living into our truest and deepest identity as God's Be-Loved.

If giving up chocolate or something helps you do this, fine.

Lighting a candle and sitting in silence a few minutes every morning?

Doing the Living Compass daily devotional or the Way of Love Lenten calendar?

Coming on this afternoon's Prayer Walk or the Wednesday evening Zoom class?

Decluttering your life – physically, spiritually, psychically?

Giving more to charity, be it church or next Saturday's Love Your Neighbor Drive-thru or to help Ukrainian refugees.

Whatever speaks to you.

Whatever helps you hear loud and clear that you are God's Be-Loved, and there's nothing you need or can do to make God love you even a speck more.

You have within you right now everything you need to share that love, overflowing,

to put it into action, in your own unique, authentic way.

You can "Be" the YOU God created you to be.

"Be loved. Be kind. Be you."

I didn't dare ask Miss Frances to dig out her old supplies and make up a batch of those cute backpack tags for us grownups.

She's got plenty to do with Lent and Holy Week prep.

But I admit it did cross my mind.

Then I remembered that we each already have a "tag" that can never be misplaced.

It's the sign of the cross.

For most of us, first made on our foreheads with holy oil when we are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.  
And then recalled on Ash Wednesday,  
a cross of ashes as a sign of our mortality and penitence,  
that we are utterly dependent upon the tender mercy of God.  
And it is to the cross that we follow Jesus this Lent, and always.  
Onward, to the cross of Jesus –  
the most unique, authentic, radical act of lovingkindness  
the world has ever known.

This is what "tags" us as who and whose we are.  
This is what rescues us from the temptation of trying to be something other  
than our truest, deepest selves.  
It's what frees us to Be Loved. Be Kind. Be exactly who God created us to be.

Thanks be to God.

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