

A beloved member of the first church I served used to get frustrated with my sermons because he never felt like I told him what to do. I thought that was a good thing, since central to especially Lutheran-flavored Christianity is God's gift of love which we *can't do* anything to earn. I'm not trying to get you to leave here on a Sunday and *do* something, other than maybe think about how that love of God is even deeper and wider than what you thought last week. And, sure, that should lead us all to love other people a little better; but scripture isn't always trying to get us to do something, and believe it or not, that includes today's gospel.

We read dozens of Jesus' conversations and parables that invite us to see ourselves as various characters. We read about the prodigal son and see ourselves as that younger brother covered in pig poo, or maybe as the cranky older brother who always did what he was told. We read about Jesus calling Peter out of the boat and feel ourselves sinking beneath the waves. In these and so many other stories we imagine receiving the help and healing and wisdom that Jesus imparted to those around him. But did you ever notice how with this story, the temptation is always to see ourselves as Jesus? Particularly if you began a Lenten discipline on Ash Wednesday, and you're now on day five of some kind of deprivation, we read this story and think, well, Jesus hadn't eaten for 40 days, but he didn't turn stones into bread, so I guess I can be like Jesus and leave the Oreos in the pantry for another six weeks. Or Jesus was offered power and authority for worshipping the devil and he resisted, so I guess I can be like Jesus and not worship the devil. It's understandable that we wouldn't want to see ourselves as Satan, but there's only one Son of God in this story, and it's not us. This is Jesus' temptation, not ours.

It may seem like the devil is trying to get Jesus to do things that he shouldn't do, but that's even not the real test here. There is nothing wrong with a little supernatural bread-making—at least not when Jesus turns five loaves into lunch for 5,000. And there's nothing wrong with supernaturally getting oneself safely off of a cliff—at least not when Jesus somehow slips through the crowd outside Nazareth when they want to pitch him off of one. The devil's test is not so much about what Jesus might *do*. The test is about who Jesus is. If you were to read this story out of your bible, you'd see that the verses immediately preceding this scene narrate Jesus' ancestry, all the way back to Adam, the first son of God. Immediately preceding that is the story of Jesus' baptism, when the voice from heaven speaks directly to Jesus saying, "You are

my Son, the beloved.” Yet the devil tries to call Jesus’ identity into question: *If you are the Son of God, command this stone...If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.*

The devil knows very well who Jesus is. But Jesus knows who and whose he is, too. Jesus won’t prove he is the Son of God by doing things that are inconsistent with the character of God. That would first of all mean not showing off his power to prove a point to the devil. But it would also rule out violating the laws of nature for his own comfort or personal gain. It would exclude worshipping anyone or anything other than the Lord. It would eliminate calling on angelic forces to protect his body that would one day be broken on the cross. The devil is correct in saying that Jesus, the Son of God, *could* do any of these things. Some of these things would even have made his mission a little easier: it would have been efficient for him to feed hungry people with a word; he could have vanquished Israel’s oppressors if he had had instant authority over all the kingdoms of the world; it would certainly have been a less painful way to conquer death if he had called the angels to get him off the cross. But a good god doesn’t compromise with the evil in the world, so Jesus doesn’t compromise with the devil and his offers, however harmless and even helpful they may seem.

Jesus is quite clear about who he is: the one who will not violate the laws of God as a shortcut to accomplishing his mission of salvation, the one who will not use force to coerce the obedience of God’s children, the one who will not selfishly do what is best for himself at the expense of his service to others. Jesus identifies completely with God’s vision for the world, not with the self-serving ways humanity is prone to think or act. As Christians, we are called to that same identity—which means we define ourselves, our worth, and our purpose differently than the world would define it for us. But if we see ourselves anywhere in this story, it has to be playing the part of the devil, questioning that identity, asking God to do things our way, challenging God to prove God’s love for us even as we run from the path of selfless, merciful, humble service that Jesus has called us to follow.

So again, this gospel isn’t about what we’re supposed to do—to buck up and resist temptation like Jesus resisted temptation. Instead, this story shows us that God loves us enough to have done the hard work of obedience for us, avoiding the shortcuts we’d love to take, living the laws we try so hard to justify bending or breaking, passing the tests we fail. There’s not much for us to *do* but to be thankful.