

Lent 1
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

February 14, 2016
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Guaranteed failure

I have prepared one Lenten Sermon this year, broken up into five installments, and you will get one each Sunday of Lent. They are drawn from the wisdom shared with us by the Rev. Richard Rohr. He is a well-known author, speaker and conference leader in the area of Christian Spirituality. He runs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, and he was the keynote speaker at Convention last year.

I say "wisdom shared by Rohr," and not "The Wisdom of Rohr" for two reasons. First, we don't preach Richard Rohr here, we preach Jesus Christ. Second, this is not his wisdom. It is the wisdom of Jesus—Fr. Richard made it abundantly clear that this is so. It is also the wisdom of every great spiritual tradition humanity has ever experienced. In other words, it is native to our own tradition, AND it finds corroboration in the others.

I say, "Wisdom," because it is an attempt at approaching a mystery. As you will see, it goes beyond the simple answers to the faith that the Church is so fond of. It does not deny them—but it reaches beyond them, and like the approach to any sense of the Mystery, it is a struggle. The easy obfuscations that derail us from the hard work are many and hugely seductive. It will require ultimately the death of the rule of the ego, and that is what makes these topics fitting material for a Lenten sermon. It is about death in the hope of the resurrection.

Albert Einstein is credited with saying, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."¹ Whatever mindset we had in the past when we created the future we now live laid the foundations for the problems of the present as well as its successes. The golden age we aimed for was not achieved. Going back to rebuild the tomorrow that is now today using yesterday's tools will only result in the same today that we have. To expect otherwise is to fall guilty of another quote by Einstein: "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."²

Fr. Rohr was more specific. He asked us to look very closely at how we respond to things. We respond to things by categorizing them quickly in the categories we already have in our heads. If it confirms those categories we call it true and good. If it violates them we call it false and bad. In this way we divide our world instantly into good and bad. He said, "Don't take my word for it, just watch yourself and you will see!" The

¹ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/albert_einstein.html#Apl71wOUSzszHUUD.99

² *Ibid.*

point, of course, is that we are recreating our present with the categories that brought us to the current situation. We have never stopped to look at the categories, the series of boxes on shelves in our minds into which we put things. We assume that they are true, that they are even divinely inspired. We can quote chapter and verse from the Bible and maybe even quote some of the church fathers that support our foregone conclusions, though we generally cannot quote those that disagree with us. Without being aware of our thinking we fall into dualistic thinking:

- Good or bad,
- True or false
- Angel or Demon.
- We or They

Rohr also pointed out to us that the field of psychology as well as the field of spirituality both agree: Either/or thinking and black and white categories are of the lowest order of thinking. They are, in fact, one of the hallmarks of the thinking patterns of the addict. I guess we're all addicts...

In today's Gospel lesson the Devil tempts Jesus to either/or thinking. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Most of our wildernesses feel like our own doing, don't they? We beat up on ourselves for letting ourselves get into such pickles. Sometimes that is the case, but to assume that such is always the case is either/or thinking. It boxes God in to a way to make sure my life is comfortable. Either/or thinking is always a way to let the ego stay in control. Sometimes our difficulties are not anything of our doing, and blame is not helpful. In fact, they can end up being tools in the hands of God.

In the wilderness Jesus fasts for 40 days and 40 nights. Here we see echoes of Noah's flood, Moses on Mt. Sinai receiving the Law, and Elijah after the confrontation on Mt. Carmel. 40 days and 40 nights is a time of full spiritual maturing, of coming to fruition of the work of God. It is long enough for our either/or thinking to give way to something more profound, something more spiritually mature, something more like the mind of God. Under these circumstances the devil comes to tempt him. Now, what else is the devil going to try to do but to get him to move backwards? In each of the temptations the devil sets up an either/or situation.

- You're hungry, you're the son of God: Make bread from stones
- I am lord of the world: submit to me and I will give it to you.
- You're the son of God: show your power by throwing yourself off the temple pinnacle.

Each of these temptations is the same temptation that the serpent presented to Eve in the Garden of Eden. God has set up a system, yes, but is it the only system? No—you can

set yourself up against God and create your own system. Choose: yours or God's. The subtlety of this temptation lies in this: To imagine that God's system does not also include your own best interest, to assume that God is at odds with you. The real kicker here is that if God is at odds with you then God and you are two opponents on the same field. God ceases to be the ground of all being. God becomes only a being in a greater Ground—and you also are such a being. You make yourself equal with God. There's a real ego-trip here!

On the other hand, Jesus has just spent 40 days and 40 nights with God. Jesus knows God loves him, and he knows that his own best interest lies within the whole plan of God. What doesn't fit is the divisive sort of thinking the devil introduces. Jesus sidesteps either/or thinking. Jesus chooses the higher-order thinking, and, quoting the Scripture, the word of God, Jesus chooses unity over division. Jesus will not set God up as an opponent on a greater field of action.

The profound wisdom of Jesus' response is this: Jesus chooses unity. Jesus chooses surrender in humility. Jesus chooses (and I believe this is the real essence of resisting temptation) to live not by the ego, but by the spirit that is in unity with God, the Ground of all Being.

The ego thinks in either/or categories. It's the only categories that make sense to it.

- This is me, this is not me.
- I am me, and you are you.
- I'm all about taking care of me, even if I have to not take care of you.

Thomas Merton calls this the false self, and the false self has only this concept of self. It is the only self it has, says Rohr, and that self must die in order to find the true self. To reach beyond either/or thinking by the power of the ego, then, is an exercise in guaranteed failure. Whatever we thought we were we are not. The categories we are used to are not adequate to the big questions in life. The categorical thinking we are so used to is quicksand. We cannot do it by our own strength. All we can do is surrender to mystery.

When we humbly seek the mystery soon we find, as Rohr says so aptly, that we come to know—better yet, we come to be known by—be known through the mystery. Someone Else is knowing through us, and what we are knowing and being known to be is love—and this is pure gift.

The first lesson of Lent is surrender—surrender your either/or thinking, your categories and your labels. These only give your ego a chance to stay in charge and justify unloving actions.

For every surrender we must put something in its place or we will slip back to what we know. What to place there? Humble, loving service. What can you do for another that is purely motivated by love? What can you do for another that is focused entirely on the other? Far more difficult and significant than giving up TV, beer or chocolate, this is your first Lenten discipline.