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AMDG

Lent 1A - March 3, 2017

I've heard it said that there are two kinds of people in the world - those who know they are God's beloved, and those who do not. Those who know they are God's beloved spend their lives delighting in God's world and bringing joy to others; those who do not, spend their lives vainly trying to make their own lives happy and comfortable.

And, while I don't particularly agree with statements that begin, "there are two types of people in the world..." there is a basic truth here. I think it's true that understanding who you are and whose you are is one end of the spectrum and not understanding who you are and whose you are is at the other end. Some blessed ones - like the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu - hang out mostly on this end. And, we can probably think of several characters in the world who hang out mostly on this end. But, throughout life I believe we all wander between both ends of the spectrum. On the one end we have life in paradise, represented in today's readings by the Garden of Eden. Deep in our hearts we know we live as God's beloved. We want for nothing. Our life is filled with abundance and joy; and we feel compelled to share that abundance and joy with others.

What is life like when we live not as God's beloved? It's a life driven by ego - I want, I don't want; I like, I don't like. This is mine; that's yours. I don't have enough. I'm not enough.

Mostly our lives are lived between both ends of these extremes. Day to day we are challenged by the temptations that distract us from our true identity as God's beloved. Sometimes delighting in our identity as God's beloved, sometimes feeling disconnected and separated from God. And, that's what today's readings lay out for us, because, at the end of the day, all the various challenges and temptations we encounter in our lives stem from our tendency to forget who we are and whose we are. As human beings are hard-wired to seek happiness and security. When you don't remember who you and whose you are, you'll do all kinds of things to dispel the insecurity that naturally comes in life.

You'll seek happiness from the things that can provide only fleeting satisfaction. Obsessed with seeking your own happiness and security, you'll miss the assurance, abundance, and joy God has set out before your very eyes.

The Gospel reading today started at the wrong place. It should have begun a few verses before, at Jesus' baptism. "And ... suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

This isn't just Jesus' story; it's our story. We are God's beloved, it is you and me in whom God is well-pleased. We are God's own, and our lives are fulfilled when they are lived as God's beloved. When we know that, when we feel that deep inside, then we lack for nothing, our insecurities are dispelled, our search for happiness is ended; we want nothing more than to share our abundance with others.

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden, is such a beautiful metaphor of our human dilemma. As we consider it, try not to think of the serpent as Satan. I think it's unhelpful when we try to pin our own poor choices on some supernatural being. Rather, think of the serpent as your own insecurities. It is our insecurities, not knowing who we are and whose we are, that leads us to venture out on our own. Just like Adam and Eve. (And you all get that Adam was right there when all this was happening. Don't be fooled into thinking this was all Eve's fault.) Here they were in paradise, wanted for nothing. But then their egos got in there, those insecure egos. "Maybe I don't have everything I need. Maybe God's holding back on the good stuff. Maybe there's something better, something shinier, something tastier." And, it's in that insecurity they chose to forge their identity on their own, independent of God, and so they take and eat the forbidden fruit, the fruit that cemented their irrational insecurities, leading them to seek their own protection and their own happiness. This is certainly the story of all of our lives, seeking safety and happiness in all the wrong places.

Jesus' encounter with the devil is the complete opposite. The devil also tries to undermine his relationship with God by suggesting he is not secure as God's beloved, that he should test it by throwing himself off the mountain, or that he should go his own way by creating food for

himself, or that he should accept fame and fortune from the devil's hands rather than trust God's provision. But, Jesus resists each attempt to undermine his identity as God's beloved, not just by quoting Scripture, but by quoting Scripture that reminds him of God's trustworthiness, the need to depend on God for all good things, and of God's promise to care for him and all God's children. This is the life abundant we were intended to live.

Adam and Eve forgot whose they were and so lost themselves in the temptation to secure their identity on their own. Jesus falls back on his secure relationship with God, reminding himself who he is and whose he is, a dependent, but beloved, child of God – dependent on the providence, care, and protection of the God who has promised to do anything to care for him and all of us.

There are so many temptations in this world. And, they come not as fruit hanging from a tree but as subtle messages that undermine our identity and invite us to forget whose we are. Our consumer-driven economy bombards us with suggestions that we are inadequate, that if we don't have this particular thing, this new model, that shiny object, then we are insignificant. Our culture pushes us to be better than others, to achieve more, and acquire more than our neighbors. And so many political leaders – of all parties and of all nations – work to convince us that we have a great deal to fear, that enemies surround us on all fronts, and that if we just follow their agendas we will be safe and secure. In the face of so many identity-obscuring messages, it is more important than ever to remind ourselves of the baptismal promise that safe-guarded and empowered Jesus - the promise that reminds us that God says we are so totally enough, that there is plenty to go around, and that we need not live in fear.

Lent is our annual focused opportunity to remind ourselves of this great truth. It's our opportunity to restore our confidence in God's providence, care and protection, and to recognize our tendency to seek joy outside of God's grace. During Lent we use the very potent spiritual tools of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving as a sort of reset button to help us live closer to the paradise end of the spectrum. None of these tools has power in and of themselves. We gain nothing in God's eyes by giving up meat for 40 days. However, when we apply a little discipline to let go of

something we know clouds our awareness of who we are and whose we are, we can be more mindful of the things we are avoiding, and are able to be more present to the reality of living in God's abundance. One of the disciplines I am practicing this Lent, has to do with my phone. I know I spend entirely too much time fiddling with my iPhone - reading email, checking the weather, watching newsfeeds, looking at my messages, and many other silly distractions. It separates me from those around me. And, when I'm alone, it distracts and removes me from being present to my life in the moment. My phone, which is a useful tool for connection to others and to the world, has become an obstacle to connection. So, I'm practicing the discipline of a phone fast. I'm keeping it in my pocket during meals and conversations. I'm paying attention to the times I do pull out my phone, and asking, "is it necessary, or is it distracting me from what's going on around me?" And, on my Sabbath - which is Monday - I am not checking email at all. I know this will allow for more time with those around me, and will keep me living in the present. I'm confident that this fast along with my other Lenten disciplines, will strengthen my relationship with God by making me more present to God, to others and to myself. I hope it will continue after Easter. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are powerful tools, but only when we apply them mindfully and with the purpose of strengthening our relationship with God.

My brothers and sisters, we are each one of us God's beloved. God delights in us and wants nothing more than to prove his love for us, if we will only stop trying to go it on our own. Let us keep a holy Lent by using the tools of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving to remind us of our belovedness and help us live our lives delighting in God's abundance.