

**Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ
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Luke 4: 1-13
"Flirting, Seduction, and Reality"

February 25, 2007

How do you feel when someone flirts with you? Let me clarify that. How do you feel when someone flirts with you who is incredibly attractive – great smile, great build, the total package. The dance of seduction is so intoxicating. We're willing to suspend reality, as our faces flush and the beat of our heart quickens. A wink can get me to believe anything. On *Desperate Housewives*, Tom and Lynette have opened a new pizzeria. Tom has hired Edie's 18 year-old nephew, in part, because of his looks. He's a terrible worker – lazy, comes in late. Finally, Lynette fired Austin for smoking marijuana on the job, but Tom hired him back because "teenage girls think he's hot...he'll bring in all the high school girls and half the men's chorus." And Austin, the hunk, knows it. He can be just as lazy as he wants because his looks give him job security. Imagine what happens when he flirts, when he seduces them with his charm. Imagine the *reality*: he just wants good tips. Using seduction to get what you want.

That's what the devil did to Jesus after 40 in the wilderness. We usually read that the devil *tempted* Jesus. My New Testament professor, Marilyn Salmon, said that the word translated from the Greek is closer to seduction; and that makes a lot of sense to me in this text. The devil tried to *seduce* Jesus – he used flattery, he kept trying different lines... He tried to seduce Jesus with things that he thought would meet Jesus' needs: with bread for his hunger, power to accomplish his mission, and proof that his God would protect him from harm.

You might equate seduction with sexuality, and that is certainly true; it's what we think of most immediately. But seduction is much more than that. It means to lead someone astray with false promises; it means to persuade someone to disobedience or disloyalty. Seduction, as you know, doesn't take the first "no" as the final answer. After three tries, the devil still didn't get his way, but as the

passage ends, "he retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity." Sounds sleazy, doesn't it? The art of seduction.

Did you know there are courses with tips for seduction? Onlinedatingschool.com has a list for how to be America's Next Top Flirt. Smile, use your eyes, focus on something they want, compliment them – all to get what *you* want. They didn't include this on their list, but from what I've seen, their tips would include: learn all their insecurities, play off their negative body images, and focus on those struggling with their self-esteem. I'm not suggesting you do this. I'm suggesting this is what a hustler once did to me! All that flattery, attention... But, when all that flirting and seduction meets reality: they're not interested in me but what they can get from me. We must advise our friends and teach our youth, but it's really hard. It takes tremendous strength of character and the knowledge of unconditional love planted deep within our heart to resist a seducer whose flirting is not real. But, when our needs and our hurts *are* real, when what we desperately want is anyone to think we're beautiful, that's when it's hard to tell the difference.

Let's look more closely at what Jesus did to resist the seductions of the devil. Jesus didn't have low self-esteem, he didn't have or care about body images, and he wasn't plagued by insecurities – or least he wasn't paralyzed by his *questions*. But anyone who hasn't eaten in 40 days is hungry. And anyone who has the kind of huge mission ahead of him to proclaim a radically new understanding of God's kingdom – that will be at odds with all the religious and political authorities – could use some assistance and some extra power to do it. He would be justified by giving the offer a second thought. And anyone who loved God as much as Jesus did would want to do everything they could to protect the reputation of their loved one. The seducer says, "There's no harm in a little bread. It'll be our secret. There's no harm if you're just trying to do good things. There's no harm in asking God to protect you; look, it's written right here in scripture." Jesus had to say no to three things any reasonable person might want and need. But, those 40 days in the wilderness prepared him for the reality that awaited him.

In addition, he was well grounded in the story of his people and the foundation of scripture. All three responses to the devil's scheming are from Deuteronomy – the temptations of Jesus were the temptations of the Israelites: 1) about their desire for more to eat than manna in the wilderness, Moses teaches, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." They needed to understand that God alone gives bread.¹ 2) The Israelites wanted to have kings like their neighboring nations, a kind of political power like everyone else; but they needed to be taught that only real power comes from

¹ Deut. 8:3

God – to worship God, not power.² 3) Israel tried repeatedly to test God, such as creating idols and whining about their daily menu, and Moses warned them, repeatedly, “Don’t put God on trial.”³

Last Wednesday we entered the 40 days of preparation (not counting Sundays) that we call Lent. It’s a time to build our strength to overcome the biggest challenges we will ever face – not fearing death but walking right through it; living with faith, not fear. We prepare ourselves through such spiritual practices as sacrificing something we want, almsgiving and choosing some form of service to our brothers and sisters, increased prayer and study, and special times to worship: building the strength of our character and grounding ourselves in God’s unconditional love. Lent mirrors the 40 days of Jesus in the wilderness. 40 days or 40 years is a biblical way of saying a long, long time – the Israelites wandering in the desert, Noah’s Arc floating in the flood waters...

Can you relate to feeling left in a wilderness – for what seems an awfully long time. The experience of being human includes times of loneliness, maybe feeling abandoned by even those closest to us, sadness from loss. We’ve all been hungry at some point; we’ve probably all wished we had a little more help, some power; we might have hoped that God would simply prove God’s love in some *tangible* way – in a “let me actually see it” kind of way. We can, I believe, relate to being in a wilderness. And we can, or at least I can, relate to the pressure of *wanting* to succumb to a flirt, who knows what I need, or thinks he knows what I need, or tries to get me to believe I need what he’s *got*, in order to get what he *wants* – something that would make my life easier, something that would fill some emptiness, an emptiness he’s convinced me I have, within.

The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus was seduced at the *end* of his 40 days, but Mark says it was *throughout* his time in the wilderness. I bring up this difference because it has been my experience that when I feel like I’m in a wilderness, that’s when the seductions are most real; not at the end, if there ever really is an end. How I have spent my time in the wilderness might determine how well I survive the seductions of those who want me to be vulnerable for their sake. In fact, it’s not only surviving but getting to thrive on the high of saying no to *something* – in reality, just an empty, false promise – in order to say yes *someone* who truly cares about our welfare – Jesus, who modeled how we can beat the battle of good vs. evil, letting the seducer know we have his number.

What happened immediately after Jesus had finished every test? Verse 14 says, “Then Jesus, *filled with the power of the Spirit*, returned to Galilee.” Filled with the Spirit, now he began to teach. It was then that he went to the synagogue and proclaimed that he has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, sent

² Deut. 6:13, also 10:20

³ Deut. 6:16

to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. It was after he faced down the seductions of the devil, *full* of the Spirit, that he proclaimed release and recovery and freedom – for the poor, the blind, and the prisoner – just like we receive release and recovery and freedom from those who want power over us when we say no.

Time in the wilderness might be scary, lonely, and probably exhausting. The energy needed to fight off the flirts and their seductive promises can be overwhelming. But when Jesus said no to the *empty*, he became *full* of the Spirit. It is, in fact, wilderness time that is the best time to build and test our strength, to deepen our love of God. We get to know more clearly who we are and what we can handle by living through such times, much more so than when we are hiding, and therefore vulnerable to those who play on our fears. Hiding brings with it the fear of being found. When someone is full of the Spirit we don't have to hide, and others can tell, and are more likely to leave us alone. We're stronger and less susceptible to frauds. The fruits of the Spirit are the qualities and characteristics others will see in you and therefore know that they can't win. Saying no to the empty promises, Jesus said yes to the Spirit-promises and was filled by the fruits of the Spirit:

- love;
- joy;
- peace;
- patience;
- kindness;
- goodness;
- faithfulness;
- gentleness;
- self-control⁴

Flirting and seduction have only one reality: For the seducer to get what they want. For example, for the warmonger to win, he must create an enemy and twist reality into a seductive cry for revenge, with our vulnerability to fear manipulated and inflamed. For this seducer to win, we must stay silent. For the racist to win, he must seduce us into thinking black-on-black crime is "their" moral failing and not a consequence of an immoral, systemic economic disenfranchisement, a failing education system, and a prison system completely bereft of rehabilitation. For this seducer to win, we must ignore reality. For the homophobe to win, he must seduce people into thinking that the divorce rate is the fault of gay and lesbian couples wanting to marry, not a society that glamorizes a celebrity marriage that lasts 55 days. For this seducer to win, we must remain closeted. The seducer, otherwise known as the devil, plays on *our* insecurities to help him victimize *his* targets to create a reality in which he is the

⁴ Galatians 5:22

powerful, the beautiful, the desired. It's so twisted, and we are so entangled, it seems impossible to address – except with the first no.

Jesus also has only one reality: to proclaim the kingdom of God. And in the kingdom of God, who are the blessed? It is the poor in Spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted⁵ – everyone wandering in a wilderness of insecurity, vulnerable to their doubts and fear. The seduction, however, is that this kingdom belongs only to me, that Christianity is about saving my own hide. But, the seducer is just flirting with you to draw your attention away from our neighbors whose lives would be changed by people who are full of the Spirit and ready to face down the seducer who wants to keep people in poverty, the seducer who wants to keep people frightened of someone they name as our enemy, the seducer who convinces us we have a need that only they can fill. In saying no to false promises, in finding that fullness of the Spirit, we must also say no to the desire to keep this power for ourselves.

You are worth so much more than what a flirt thinks of you. The world desperately needs people who will embrace their wilderness time to gather and build their strength, to deepen God's love, to confront a reality the seducer wants you to ignore. Support one another, build one another up, and we won't need a flirt who tells us we are beautiful and powerful. We won't be seduced by the promises of a benefit from something we didn't need until they told us we don't have it. We will know the reality that a Christian full of the Spirit is dangerous to the status quo, that when a Christian community full of the Spirit begins to disentangle the twisted attempts of the seducer to keep us separate, to keep our issues separate, to make us frightened of each other, he will ultimately fail in the face of the truth that sets us free. The devil may come and try again later, but we've got him on the run. Hey, that's good news!

⁵ Matthew 5: 3-10