

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Transfiguration Sunday
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
February 26, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Rejecting What the Cross is *Not*”
Christian Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11



Credit: "Christ in the Desert," detail of a chapel stained glass window, St. Joseph's Institution, Singapore. Image by Lawrence OP licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, from *Working Preacher*, Luther Seminary

As many of you know, I was married to a Catholic. And I know many of you were raised Catholic. So, most of us aware that if you're Catholic, you are discouraged from eating meat on Friday. But for some reason, if you're Catholic, fish is not meat. (Anyway, don't try to figure that out.) With that bit of brief preface, most of you may appreciate this bit of humor as we begin the season of Lent.

John Smith was the only Protestant to move into a large Catholic neighborhood. On the first Friday of Lent, John was outside grilling a big juicy steak on his grill. Meanwhile all of his neighbors were eating cold tuna fish for supper. This went on each Friday during Lent.

On the last Friday of Lent, the neighborhood men got together and decided that something just HAD to be done about John; he was just tempting them to eat meat each Friday of Lent and they couldn't take it anymore. They decided to try and convert him to be Catholic. They went over and talked with him. Much to their surprise and delight, John decided to join all of his neighbors and become a Catholic.

They took him to church and the priest sprinkled some water over him and told him "You were born a Baptist, you were raised a Baptist, and now you are a Catholic". The men of the neighborhood were SO relieved; now their biggest Lent temptation was resolved.

The next year's Lent rolled around. The first Friday of Lent came and just at supper time when the neighborhood was setting down to their fish dinners came the wafting smell of steak cooking on a grill. The neighborhood men could not believe their noses! What was going on??? They called each other up and decided to meet over in John's yard to see if he had forgotten it was a Friday during Lent.

The group arrived just in time to see John standing over his grill with a small pitcher of water. He was pouring small droplets over his steak on the grill and saying, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, and now you are a fish."

During the season of Lent, it is often customary to 'give-up' something, to forfeit something that we enjoy. This is for at least two reasons. One, Lent is a time of introspection. The introspection is meant to lead to a spiritual 'self-audit' whereby we repent from the ways in which we have gone astray and we dedicate ourselves anew. Forfeiting something, like food (fasting), teaches us that our happiness is not dependent on that which is temporal (transitory). Forfeiting teaches us that, ultimately, happiness is dependent on that which is transcendent – God.

Two, the whole giving-up of something during Lent is inspired by the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert that we read earlier. Satan tempted Jesus three times. Because at that time Jesus had no food, no prestige, and no power and wealth, he was particularly vulnerable to these temptations. Believe me, I know. After about an hour following a long run, I am very hungry, very irritable, and will pay anything or do almost anything to eat something and eat something fast! So, Satan tempted Jesus with bread. Next prestige. Next wealth and power. Jesus turned all of these temptations down. He rejected them.

As you know, I have a certain love for Catholic faith. I think they get many things wrong, like the failure to ordain women or to marry gay folk. Yet, I believe they get many things right. I will even say they get the whole ‘forfeit meat’ thing (though they include the fish loophole) right because the forfeiture is intended to point to a fundamental spiritual truth that is elucidated in today’s scripture. Jesus was in the desert to prepare, train, and discipline himself for his upcoming ministry that would ultimately lead him to carry a cross. During Lent, we are also to prepare, train, and discipline ourselves – for what? Yes, our ministries. But more specifically for us to (on Good Friday) also carry our cross – for we are on this journey with Jesus.

The training Jesus underwent in the desert enabled him to seek clarity about what the cross is *not* and to have the strength to reject it before even encountering it. So, this Lenten season, let us begin by identifying clearly what the cross is *not*.

This past week in the Intercultural Communication course I teach, the students and I discussed what are referred to as ‘cultural universals’. One of the theories we discussed is ‘Hofstede Dimensions of Culture Theory’.¹ One of the four dimensions studied was the ‘Individualism versus Collectivism Index’. “In

¹ Shannon Ahrndt, *Intercultural Communication* (2020), Open Educational Resources Collection, 24, p. 58. Available at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/oer/24>, accessed on February 25, 2023.

more individualistic societies, the interests of the individuals receive more emphasis than those of the group. Individualistic societies put more value on self-striving and personal accomplishments (that lead to a pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige). Collectivist societies put more emphasis on the importance of relationships and loyalty. The three countries that ranked the highest on Hofstede's index was Great Britain, Australia, and the United States. The USA is number one (91) on the index. Now, of course, the United States is not a monolith. For example, Brattleboro and Vermont, in general, lean toward collectivism a bit more. Countries in Latin America and Asia, for example, Guatemala and South Korea, ranked the most collectivist. And this is not surprising, the United States is the wealthiest, has the largest military, and exports the most, well, culture. Now, individualism is not necessarily 'negative', in and of itself. Neither is collectivism necessarily 'positive', in and of itself. Both can be and are blessings. Yet, both can lead to terrible consequences in the extreme.

Therefore, I would not really go so far as to say that given the three temptations of wealth, power, and prestige with which Jesus was faced and given that Hofstede's Individuality Index highlighted those three measurables that the United States is 'un-Christian'. No. I am only making the mere suggestion that

during this season of Lent, we as Christians in the United States should reflect on the degree to which our national culture affirms that which Jesus rejected.²

And I am not picking on the United States. This should be the task of every Christian in any country. On the one-year anniversary of their war, Russian Christians should certainly be thinking about to what degree are they affirm or reject their nation's behavior in the Ukraine. Christians in the United States should be asking themselves, "Did we affirm or reject our nation's behavior, say, during our invasion and occupation of Iraq on the pretext of non-existent 'weapons of mass destruction'?"

Today, in our own personal lives, are we moving farther away from or closer to our nation's values as they are reflected in, for example, our government's military spending versus its spending on health care and education? I know Centre Church invests in education and food for healthy people. Thanks be to God.

This Lent, may we all, individually and collectively, contemplate and decide clearly what the cross is *not* before we carry our cross with Jesus on Good Friday.

² Eric Stickland is very correct to say that it is not 'individualism' *per se* that makes the USA militaristic, materialistic, or dominant cultural exporters. For example, North Korea is very 'collectivistic' Yet, North Korea spends more money per capita on military than any other country. Hofstede's other dimensions are uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculine and femininity, short-term and long-term orientation, and indulgence and restraint. I could have used the indulgence and restraint orientation index as well as the individualism and collectivism index. Yet, my point was not to draw specific socio-cultural behaviors and attach them to 'vices'. My only point was that USA culture tends to value wealth, power, and prestige. Everything from capitalism, to 'individualism', to freedom fosters a craving for wealth, power, and prestige.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".