



Sunday Sermon  
February 22, 2026  
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

***Lent I***

*Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7*  
*Romans 5: 12-19*  
*Matthew 4: 1-11*

*Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.*

The church has done a lot of damage to people with her focus on sin and temptation. The root of all this may be the distortion of the Genesis story: Adam, Eve, the apple and the serpent. The false message is that we are dirty and sinful people - period. We are fallen and going to hell unless...

Paul really gives fuel to the notion of "original sin," "Sin came into the world through one man" he tells the church at Rome. Tragically, the church has developed various ways to cast away sinners, created an industry to clean souls: think of things like indulgences and confessionals. Baptism becomes a ticket into heaven. Miss the ticket and the newborn, a sinner at birth, is cast into darkness.

We become a church that is more what James Forbes labeled "sin patrols" and too many people are abandoned: women blamed for husband's infidelity, a gay person for who they are, someone struggling with mental illness or addiction being told that it was their fault, the abused being blamed for their own abuse. We are either damned or saved. Horsefeathers! This is not what Jesus taught. This is not what it means to believe in him.

The story of Adam and Eve is not an ancestral indictment of all. It is mythological story that the ancients told to explain how, we, the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve, have become disconnected from our true selves, from God our creator, from each other. It is a story of losing our way. But God's desire is for us to return to our senses and ourselves.

The ministry of Jesus is God's consummate invitation to that restoration of our true selves. In finding ourselves, we find God. And so, salvation found in Jesus Christ is not some arithmetic process where Jesus adds what Adam subtracts. It is not some quiz, where we have to say and do the right things. Salvation in Jesus Christ is rather a journey toward rediscovering our true

nature as children of God. The good news that we hear in today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, is that Jesus travels this journey with us.

Perhaps it is valuable to offer a sermon that explores each of Jesus' temptations and how they connect to our own. Perhaps, next year: you can come back for the sequel, Lent 2027. Today, I don't want us to miss the forest for the trees. This is the big picture: temptations to power, wealth and acclaim tear us away from our true selves. Jesus names these temptations as cheap, junk food substitutes that will hollow us out and leave us nothing like we are meant to be.

In the wilderness, Jesus chooses a different way. He chooses his true nature, love. He doesn't feed himself but feeds others the bread of life. He touches the sick and the dying. He literally takes up a cross and empties himself. Jesus chooses to live his authentic calling, as the Son of God. If we are to consider him a new Adam, it is simply for this reason: he models authentic living not covered up by succumbing to hollow temptations. No wonder even the centurion must say on Calvary, "Truly this was the Son of God." By showing forth his true self, he invites us to be truly ourselves.

If we don't do anything else with our Lenten season, perhaps we do contemplate this question, "How can I be more the one God created me to be?"

The Quaker Parker Palmer offers a way to explore this question by suggesting that we have fallen into the trap of living a divided life. Our inner nature does not match our outer being. (1) If salvation means anything, it means choosing to live divided no more. A shift comes through contemplation and community; shared communion wherein the inner heart and our outer actions are realigned. We gradually say "no" to the false expectations of the world and "yes" to our God given vocation.

And not surprisingly, Jesus shows us the way. He doesn't turn stones into bread for his own hunger, but his body into bread for the world. When he multiplies loaves, it is to feed others. He refuses to do miracles to impress. His power is to heal others. And faced with the worst the world can inflict upon him on the cross, he offers not anger or bitterness, but mercy and forgiveness. The true nature of Jesus is love.

And at our core, we too are love. We knew that in God's garden we can reclaim it even now. There are moments in time when we can see someone shift and choose their true nature. Gander selflessly welcomes thousands on 9/11. Greta Thunberg at age fifteen gets the world's attention with school climate strikes. Rosa Parkers refuses to move to the back of the bus. Bill W. and Dr. Bob meet, and a movement of recovery begins to take shape. In each moment, inner love is manifest into outward being. A choice is made to live in love.

These examples may seem beyond us, but they really aren't. Whether it is to stand up for life in Gaza with Greta, to sit down with Rosa in Montgomery, speak truth with residential school survivors, or gather with friends of Bill, the church - that sacred mystery whenever two or three are gathered in love, even here and now - become habitat for us to nurture love, our true selves, to live undivided. Our essence is unity in love, not divided in fear. When we show forth our true

nature as love together, well, that is when the beloved community emerges in ways that give a glimpse of a new Eden.

Tony Campolo told a story that offers such a glimpse of people choosing to live no longer divided. It goes something like this. Tony was on a trip, in another time Zone, and couldn't sleep. So well after midnight he wandered down to a doughnut shop where, it turned out, local hookers also came at the end of a night of turning tricks. There, he overheard a conversation between two of them. One, named Agnes, said, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be thirty-nine." Her friend snapped back, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake and sing happy birthday to you?" The first woman replied, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When they left, Tony got an idea. He asked the shop owner if Agnes came in every night, and when he said, "Yes." Tony then hatched his plan with the owner for a surprise party conspiracy. The shop owner's wife even got involved. Together they arranged for a cake, candles, and typical party decorations for Agnes, who was, to Tony, a complete stranger. The next night when she came in, they shouted, "Surprise!" and Agnes couldn't believe her eyes. The doughnut shop patrons sang, and she began to cry so hard she could barely blow out the candles. When the time came to cut the cake, she asked if they'd mind if she didn't cut it, if she could bring it home, just to keep it for a while and savour the moment. So she left, carrying her cake like a treasure.

Tony led the guests in a prayer for Agnes, after which the shop owner told Tony he didn't realize Tony was a preacher. He asked what kind of church Tony came from, and Tony replied, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." The shop owner couldn't believe him. "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."(2)

Dear Ones, Jesus shows us the way. We don't have to settle for a fearful life assuaged with power. Rather we can open our hearts, our minds, our doors to our true nature as beloved and as lovers of God. We can be that church, that welcomes all as we are welcomed. Let us choose to live love together.

(1) *Parker Palmer, The Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward the Undivided Life. New York: Jossey Bass, 2004.*

(2) *Brian McLaren, The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007.*