

**First Sunday of Lent – Year A
(Feb. 13, 2005)**

A Lenten Program

Back in 1973 an eminent psychiatrist named Karl Menninger wrote a book called *Whatever Happened to Sin?* The title reflected a prevalent attitude then and one that continues today. We don't like to talk about sin, especially in the light of the havoc that sin and evil have created in our lives and in our world. According to Dr. Menninger that is not a healthy attitude.

Well, the Church seems to agree with Dr. Menninger. Today's readings are all about sin. And it certainly is a salutary thing to reflect this way at the beginning of Lent since this season is all about conversion, repentance, penance, and reconciliation. It's a time to think about the many ways we fail to do what God asks us to do, the many ways we fail, not just God, but one another.

The story of Adam and Eve can still hit a raw nerve with us today. The serpent told them they would be like God, and isn't trying to be like God or playing God what so much of life is about? How often do we manipulate or try to control others? How often do we judge as though we, like God, could know what is in people's hearts? At the same time, modern society seems to hold moral precepts in very low regard. And if we look closely at the temptations of Jesus we can find their match today too. Many burn incense at the altar of drugs, sex, alcohol, and other addictions. Sheer egotism is the motive behind so much that is labeled ambition or initiative, and in the desire for power or wealth ethical principles vanish. Witness Enron and other corporate debacles. All of this is idolatry in one form or another, and few of us escape its wiles.

Even the Church has succumbed in the past and perhaps still does give in to the temptation to use wealth and power and prestige to further the kingdom of God. At no time in history was this more evident than in the sixteenth century when Martin Luther proclaimed to all the world that the Church of Rome was no longer preaching the Gospel and was in need of a thorough reform. Luther was right, of course, and while he, regrettably

from our point of view, pursued this reform outside the Church of Rome, others of his own time did it from within, notably our own St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Jesus in our Gospel today shows us how to deal with temptation quickly and effectively. He also lets us know that he will not use worldly power and wealth to establish the kingdom of God. This is what the temptations were all about. You're hungry? Well then change these stones to bread. You want people to pay attention to you? Well then soar like a bird from this mountain top. You want to rule the world? Well then just worship me and you've got it made!

No, Jesus responds, you've got it all wrong. It's not only bread that gives life. It's the word of God. It's not by circus spectacles that I reveal myself. Look for me among the lowly, the powerless, the crucified. It's not by political power that my kingdom will come. To use worldly power is to worship false gods.

Jesus taught us that the kingdom of God is won by love and that love at its very best is a crucified love.

So what are we being asked to do today? We are not being asked to spend our 40 days of Lent in some kind of morbid introspection. We are not being asked to spend this Sunday going over the past. Rather it seems to me we are being asked to apply the remedy to sin. And that remedy, again, as Jesus told us, is love. That is our Lenten challenge. So perhaps rather than setting our eyes on sin, rather than focusing on the fear that our sinfulness can cause, why not shake loose the love in us, the love that is stronger than sin, the love that casts out fear?

What kind of love is that? First of all, it's the love that carried Jesus to the cross; the love that can turn the other cheek; the love that does not sulk until apology comes on bended knee; the love that keeps marriage alive through stress and sickness, through dark nights, maybe even through infidelity; the love that goes out to those who are different in race or appearance, goes out to the homeless and the loveless, to the gross and the grimy, to all who ail from acne to AIDS. I mean the love that in Paul's famous hymn, "is patient and kind, is not jealous or boastful, is not arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice at wrong but only in the right, bears all things, believes all

things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

There, dear friends, is a Lenten program for you – and not just a program for Lent but a challenge for all of life.