

**Old Testament lesson: Genesis 3:8-11**

**New Testament lesson: Revelation 22:1-3**

“What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life.

Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” We ask, “Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your Kingdom?” (Mt. 20:21). ... We have been tempted (... tempted) to replace love with power.”

Those are the words of theologian and writer Henri Nouwen.<sup>1</sup> Nouwen’s observation that it is easier to wield power than to do the hard work of love is exactly what we see in today’s Old Testament lesson. It’s a lesson about the balance before power and love. God is love – and power. And God balances his power over our lives with his love for us and all creation, perfectly.

When things don’t go well for you – because of illness or financial constraints or relationship troubles or whatever – we wonder how God could let this happen; doesn’t God love us?!?

The thing to know is, yes, God loves you, more than anything in all the world. The reason God’s almighty power isn’t used to immediately fix everything is because God self-limits that power, under and within God’s love for us.

Within God’s love for us – for you – God contains and constrains his power over all creation. Love is supreme, and power is subservient to love. That’s just the way God is. In other words, love is the greatest power there is – God is love.

We see this in today’s Bible lesson, where God has placed man and woman – all humanity really – in paradise, the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, there’s no competition between people, there’s plenty of food and water, and companionship and time –time- to enjoy it all – no work to bog us down, nothing to distract us. The only constraint upon us in paradise is following God’s command – given by God not as a power play, but out of love.

Earlier in Genesis, God says, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” At creation, God withholds from us the knowledge of good and evil so that we need never know evil, so that we will only know the good things that God gives to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, in *Mornings with Henri J.M. Nouwen*, quoted in *Christianity Today*, February 8, 1999, 72.

In the protection of God's love, nothing can truly hurt us. In the fullness of God's being, which is beyond time and space, we are protected by God's love. But we don't yet live in the fullness of God's being – not anymore, not now – not since we tested the limits that God set for us, taking for ourselves the knowledge of good and evil.

In the knowledge of good and evil, we do suffer, momentarily, from time to time. But in the fullness of God's love for us, we are beyond the reach of any suffering, any temptation, any trouble. We are always moving toward the fullness of God's love, as long as we are not purposefully and defiantly moving away from God.

Ah! And there's the problem. In the fullness of God's love for us we are given the power to choose, to choose between love and power, between paradise and the knowledge of good of evil. We get to choose which will rule the day, for us. We see this everyday. We struggle with this everyday – the balance between love and power. Love is self-giving. Power is claimed and wielded. The only good use of power is power used for love.

Look at how God uses power in Genesis. Adam and Eve hide themselves from God and God calls to them, saying, "Where are you?" Now of course God knows where they are – he knows where we are, right now – but God wants them *and* us to stop hiding from God on our own, not out of force, not under the power of God's will thrust upon us, but by our own choice. God wants us to stop hiding ourselves behind other things. The good news is that when we do hide ourselves from God, God looks for us; God misses us when we turn away from the Lord.

Let's look at some reasons we might turn away from the Lord? We see a pretty good list right here in the Bible. Adam says to God, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid...." Fear- fear has us hide, even from God. Continuing, Adam says, "... I was afraid because I was naked...." To which God says, "Who told you that you were naked?" In other words, there are things that, for our own good, we as human beings are not to know or to do. We have God-given limitation and constraints, for our own good.

And when we go beyond those limits – when we claim to know it all based on our understanding of things apart from God – that's when we are moving away from God; hiding ourselves from the light and truth of God's love for us. Hiding ourselves. Adam says, "I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself." When we hide ourselves from God, that's an act of taking matters into our own hands, apart from God.

So there you have it: three ways we turn away from God: No. 1 – letting fear get the better of us; failing to trust God to provide for us and protect us. No. 2 – exceeding our God-given limits, and instead, claiming to know it all, to control it all. And No. 3 – taking matters into our own hands, trying to control everything and thus, walling ourselves off from God, actively hiding from God.

If you find yourself afraid of some trouble in life you're facing, trust me, God is there for you. You need not be afraid.

If you are bumping up against obstacle after obstacle in your drive to advance at all costs, that may be a sign that those are not obstacles to get over, but rather God-given limitations to accept and even embrace, the time that until God reveals a new direction.

And finally, if you are constantly taking matters into your own hands with little or no reflection upon what God is doing or desiring in the midst of a situation, now's the time to realize that you're actively turning away from God, hiding yourself from God, hiding behind your own sense of power at the expense of God's love, which is stronger than any power.

When we do that, God says to us just like he said to Adam, "Where are you?" When we're not looking to God, God is looking for us. God longs to be an active part of our lives, to have us as instruments of God's will, expressions of God's love.

Within the power of God's love for us, there is plenty of room for us to build and create, to plant seeds and enjoy their growth, to be active in this world and hopeful for its future, for the miracle of new life, new energy, new possibilities – plenty of room, as long as we make room for God, in our lives.

What is it – in this season of Lent – that is crowding out God for you? And what might it be like to set that aside and step into a deeper relationship with God? Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

From the beginning, Creator God, there was beauty in the ordinary and splendor in the commonplace. Each plant of the garden, each stream of the rising hill carried the mark of your touch.

Into our world, where we often ignore the common and pass by the ordinary, you sent Jesus. He showed us how to tap into our experiences to see God's blessings in lost coins, narrow doors, and simple seeds.

He leads us in Lent to take on acts of charity and to develop eyes that glimpse the holy in the ordinary. Jesus walks with us as we let go of sin and separation.

Holy and wondrous are your works, O God, revealing splendor in the ordinary and shaping our souls to shine forth your glory.

Help us to be true to your vision for this world, confident that the fullness of your glory is even now coming into being.

We pray this with our faces lifted to you and our voices raised in song, singing together the prayer that you gave us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive  
our debtors;  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**