

A sermon preached Almaden Valley United Church of Christ  
San Jose, CA  
Date: February 21, 2010  
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Luke 4:1-13 (Psalm 91)

### *Desires and Needs*

This is the first Sunday in Lent. Some ancient Christian traditions, and modern ones, too, hold that the Sundays are “in” Lent but not “of” Lent. In fact, the Sundays during the time of Lent are like “mini-Easters” where there is a break from the time of fasting and we take time to remember and celebrate Jesus victory over sin and death.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues through forty days, not counting, of course, the Sundays. It is time, some believe, of self-denial, meditation, fasting, or getting along without the things you would normally desire.

What do we desire? What do we humans desire? Well, let’s get basic and think about Jesus’ temptations. We need food, but many of us desire it, too. Especially with all the taste temptations that we have today it’s easy to succumb to the desire of the appetite and overdo it (present company accepted, of course!). Humans desire power. We all like to be in control of our lives. Often, though, we desire to control other people’s lives, too. We especially desire power over people when the result is is that we can satisfy some other desire we have—say for food, or money, or oil, or land, and clean water, or for extravagant play things, our toys, you might say. Safety and security: we need to be safe, right? We need to be safe from what? From nature? From our neighbors? Maybe and probably both, right? The questions is: when does our need for safety become so intense that it becomes a desire that begins to stomp on our other privileges and rights and discriminates and abuses those people who we lump together as somehow “dangerous?”

Well, I could go on and one about our human desires, but I need not to, or desire not to, to make the point of this sermon.

The level of our desires often times exceeds our actual needs. In some cases, and on a very kind of simple level, our desires might be said to represent our needs out of control. Can you imagine the kind of world we would live in if people only took from the earth or from each other the things we actually need rather than all the things we desire? I wonder if simple living IS really the way to end warfare?

Desire is contagious. If you desire something your desire can encourage my desire even though before I saw it whatever “it” is, I could have cared less about it. (The picture on the front of the bulletin depicts this phenomenon.) It’s like a child playing alone with a toy and another child comes into the room and all of sudden wants to play with that same toy. Now if the two children are fortunate, there might be two of the same kind of toy in the room and the one child who came in later might just simply go over to the identical toy, pick it up, and begin to play with it without bothering the other child. But, what happens if there are only two of that specific kind of toy in the room and a third child enters into the scene? Now, maybe that third child will go peacefully to pick up that other toy and be perfectly satisfied, but you and I know, because we have been there, this won’t last for long. Before long that third child will want to find out what is so exciting and desirable about the toy the other two children are playing with and with try to possess it in whatever way they can get the toy.

This whole scene is what philosopher and anthropologist, Rene Girard, calls “mimetic desire” or desire to imitate people in our community. (For more, see “Rene Girard” in [www.Wikipedia.org](http://www.Wikipedia.org)) It’s a contagion that Girard believes has led to strife, and warfare, and scapegoating and sacrificing in both civil and religious societies. When our desires, especially the communal desires, run away with us and we think we absolutely need or must have more than we have currently there is a communal force that is very strong to either to wage war on neighbors who have what we think should be our toys, or, if we are fighting each other over something, to find a scapegoat that can be blamed for this mess we have gotten ourselves into. The problem is, of course, is that this scapegoating tendency on the part of humanity blinds people to the realization that it was their desirous or selfish behavior towards other people or other societies in the beginning that started the whole mess by the consuming society overstepping its basic needs and depriving other societies or individuals of their needs, or perhaps, desires. Sadly, we humans imitate one another in seeking to satisfy our desires which go beyond our basic needs and this leads to evils foisted on each other— evils like jealousy, coveting, destructive scheming, and warfare.

In our scripture reading from Luke Jesus is tempted with desires by Satan or the Devil (*Satan* being the Hebrew version and the *Devil* being the Greek version of the same evil phenomena.) Satan is trying his or her or its best to get Jesus to imitate other humans in their desire for more food, or power, or safety than they really need. Jesus doesn’t buy into it thank God. In fact, Jesus is on a Spirit-led fast to prepare himself for living within his

needs and controlling his desire so that he can do the immense work that is ahead of him as he has just begun his ministry.

Rene Girard believes that Satan is not so much an individual demon as it is that mimetic desire that overtakes communities throughout history. “Satan” is really those times when individuals in communities begin to imitate the bad desirous destructive behaviors and act out against a scapegoat or each other or other societies. Satan is not so much a noun as it is an adjective that describes the delirium of desires gone out of control. The wonderful thing about the story of Jesus, according to Girard, is that Jesus not only overcame these out of control desires during his life, but he defeated through his resurrection the horrible of outcomes of a society that needed a scapegoat for the rebellion and unrest that was happening in the Jewish community of the time which was living under the occupation force of a foreign power, the Romans. In the case of Jesus the scapegoat lives! Through our hope of renewal and resurrection, and the knowledge and faith that we *can* be *renewed* and *revitalized* and resurrected we defeat the communal destructive behavior that once or could entangle us in a destructive cycle of behavior.

As we go through Lent this year, let’s remember to try to live according to our needs not our desires. If we choose to imitate someone, if we need to imitate someone, lets imitate Jesus, our teacher and guide. And let’s remember in the midst of our self-denial or simple living that everyone now and then we need to take a break and celebrate the living love of Jesus and the light of Jesus which guides our hearts. Amen.

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