

I want to start by thanking Rich for supporting Youth Led Services for these many years. I would also want to thank the teenagers for not volunteering to do the sermon when I asked. More about that later, but suffice it to say, I couldn't get a taker. So I chose to do it myself, and am honored to be here.

In this morning's Gospel, we find Jesus in the wilderness. He was led there by the Spirit and lived there, for 40 days and ate nothing. Think about that. 40 days. Nothing to eat? It says he was famished, and then explains how he battled Satan and didn't waver. He didn't waver.

Fasting is incredibly hard work. My own experiences with fasting have left me tired, shaky, very very cold, irritable, and weak. I know these teens, who have been fasting since very early Saturday morning, feel similarly. I can't imagine doing anything but sleeping after fasting, let alone going to battle with Satan as he challenges my relationship with Almighty God.

The issues, as I see them, are these: what makes us strong Christians, and what happens when we are challenged in this way?

By the time we are sitting here together at a service at St. Francis, we're likely in the same place about the core beliefs and values of the Church. I say core, because I know we don't all agree on all the finer points, and never will (thanks be to God), but at the core of us, we are of like mind and spirit. We have to know our values in order to live them. We must practice them in order to live them. This isn't always easy.

We live in a society today that promotes and places great value on busy-ness. We work hard, we play hard, we encourage our kids to do the same. Somewhere, somehow, we've allowed this to become part of our DNA, believing that we needed to live this way to be successful. Many things today make this easy and in so doing also make it very, very hard.

Perhaps this is something technology has caused. Technology has certainly made it possible to move faster and be busy all hours of the day (and night), supposedly to accomplish more, and, we tell ourselves, to be more...more important, more wealthy, more powerful. We buy into this philosophy – maybe because we're too swept along by the current to stop and consider what is happening. We unwittingly pass this philosophy onto our kids, who are running as fast as their legs will carry them.

Running makes us tired, doesn't it? I'm sure we've all felt tired. Ask any teenager the meaning of 'tired' and they will readily tell you. Younger children will too, just as my son did when elementary school presented its overwhelming academic and social demands to him. One night, when going to bed, he said, "Mom, first it's school, then it's summer, but that goes by really quick, then it's high school, then college then work and then it's all over." He was only six.

Temptation takes many forms and is, indeed, ever present. My fear is that we are so engrossed in our lives that we don't recognize this. If we are constantly being tempted, especially when we are tired, don't we risk being pulled further away from the arms and voice of God, just as Satan was trying to do with the Gospel? It is surely very difficult to fight off temptation if we're exhausted, and we certainly can't fight it if we don't recognize it.

As I stand here now, I wonder aloud how this translates to our kids, in our world, today. It seems we need to be worried both by their levels of fatigue and also about their sense of selves as Christians.

Do you ever wonder if kids have any “down time”? If so, what do they do with it? Often they seem to be tethered to their cell phones, talking or texting, engrossed in action-packed video games, or watching TV. I know this is perhaps an overgeneralization - the list of what they do is probably very long, but I would venture a guess that it's quite likely that whatever they are doing, they're always running. There is often no clear distinction between busy-ness and down time. We adults are not much different. While I try, I often feel powerless to make lasting changes in my own habits. I would guess I'm not alone.

Further, I don't think we as a society have answered the \$64,000 question of what we'll do when we get to the golden destination we're running toward. What happens then? My guess is we'll keep up the pursuit; we'll run toward something else, not pause and reflect. We might not know how.

This emphasis on busy-ness is so counter to what the Bible tells us about rest. Last time I checked, God made the world in 6 days then took the seventh for rest, didn't He? So why can't we? Sabbath, the period of rest, is so critically important. It's when we recharge our batteries, connect with each other, and connect more completely with God. It needs to be a time of peace and reflection, for it must be quiet for us to hear what God's calling us to do.

Let's take a moment and look at adolescent development. To oversimplify things, I would say that the biggest development goal for teenagers is to figure out who they are - to separate from their family enough to define themselves as individuals and to prepare for life as an adult. How do they do that? Through interaction with the world around them, namely their peers, and by testing the waters with regards to what they believe in and how they want to live. Many flounder through their teen years - it is often messy. They are tested constantly. Trial and error is at the core of their behavior. Though it's a necessary part of their growth, it's hard to stand by and watch, trying not to interfere.

Our kids are blessed to be a part of an institution, the church, which clearly sets the parameters for values and morals. What is so incredible is that these kids, our kids, choose to make this their frame of reference. You see, the stronger one's values are, the more able we are to live in such a way that we set limits on behavior we don't believe in. We are capable of recognizing what drains our energy, recognizing which false idols lurk in our worlds, what temptations exist. Through this recognition we are able to more actively live our lives, more safely live our lives, and as Christians, that means we're more spiritually grounded and more prepared to do the work God has chosen for us to do.

Through our church we are given what I believe are three invaluable tools. First, we are given the structure of the worship services, which allow us the opportunity to recognize our sins, confess them, and then, through communion, experience renewal and rejuvenation with the body and blood of Christ. We can do this 4 times a week! Secondly, we have the yearly liturgical calendar. We are, as Rich so often says, an Easter people. We celebrate the cycle of birth, death and resurrection every year. We are embarking into Lent again this weekend. This is the time for us to be quiet, to consider our values and do an inventory on our behavior. Third, we exist in Community. This is critically important. It shapes who we are, what we believe, and how we behave. The best part is that we can keep trying to get it right, daily, weekly, yearly...together.

For those of you who are new, we've been doing youth-led services for a long time. As I said when I started, this year when I asked for sermon volunteers, nobody

stepped forward. I do think several held the fantasy that Kiersten, Colin, maybe Janna, who are all now in college, might come back and preach again, essentially bailing them out. I don't think that was the only thing happening. Let me tell you: these are not lazy teenagers. They are not without thoughts and feelings or the ability to reflect. Why, then, did nobody come forward? My guess is that they are just plain tired. Not necessarily because of the fast. Fatigued, I think, because of the energy it takes to do all the things they need to do: academics, sports, music, family life, social life, and the list goes on. Most are faced with peer pressure and typical teenage temptations – drugs, alcohol, sex and driving too fast. They also have a lot of real world pressures. Their lives are busy and noisy and so much more complicated than most of us understand.

They are the generation of the war in Iraq, and anti-terrorism safety drills at school. The generation which watched the natural disasters of the tsunami in Asia and Hurricane Katrina here at home, several have even seen the devastation up close on mission trips. They have lived through the suicide of a peer a year ago; they go to school with the brother of the boy who stabbed his classmate. They have seen and continue to see the unpredictability of the world up close. Yet, they somehow persist in their commitment to carry out God's work, the best they know how, within a secular world that doesn't encourage healthy definition of self, that fails to challenge temptations and which falls short of guiding us toward true renewal.

When asked what we do in youth group, I sometimes say a whole lot of nothing. Seriously, though, these guys have perfected the art of fellowship and free play and quite simply, being. They could hang together for hours and do nothing more than laugh, act goofy, and be. Over the years we've tried more organized activities and even considered offering a structured Christian Ed program. We always gravitate back to fellowship – the need for community and a chance to simply be, together. As I think about it, I wonder if they are just responding to an instinctive urge to rest and rejuvenate, something which we seem to lose the ability to accomplish as we get older. In any case, youth group is a place they come to rest, and when more rested they are able to reflect, often, in the many discussion which spontaneously emerge on a regular basis. They also pray, through silent meditation and group prayer. I understand that this precious time is what brings many to youth group. It's not about me, or Mike, as cool as we are, but about the group, it's commitment to each member and the whole. They have worshipped in this way, together, through 9/11, through deaths of family members and other trauma. They've amazed me with their ability to sit together despite having to face the most frightening stuff. Their spiritual maturity and commitment to one another and to God is amazing. They live in a world of temptations, and a world that often drains them, a world that does not always appear to offer hope – but they find their own, through faith and community. It's not always graceful, yet they persevere. I do believe that if it were to be graceful, it would mean they wouldn't be doing what they need to do – exploring, trying, sometimes tripping, trying again. They learned that here. Events such as youth led services strengthen their sense of membership with this powerful community, and the yearly task of fasting allows them to test themselves against the temptations of the world. Through this, they accomplish so much more than raising money to feed the hungry of the world, which in itself is a huge accomplishment.

I decided I want to close this sermon by telling you a little bit about my grandfather. You see, he was a pretty incredible guy. He would be close to 100 if alive

today, and he taught us a lot. He led a colorful, remarkable life and he was no stranger to adversity or to the curve balls life throws at us all. Family folklore says that he would take a walk at the middle of each workday – something which helped sustain him through grueling days at a high powered job in Boston. He made this ritual a part of his life. He would walk, and he would think. He had quirky habits, too many to mention, but one was that he was known to bring a lawn chair in the middle of his yard and he would sit there, alone. On purpose. He sat in quiet, to rest and reflect, and, I'm guessing, also to listen. He did this often.

In my grandfather's final year he began to lose touch with reality, and it wasn't until then that we realized that he had what I would call "unfinished business". I share this to highlight a point – that despite his being a role model for me, he clearly wasn't perfect. I do think, though, that he got it "right".

I think if he were here, he'd tell us that life is an ongoing challenge and that you do the best you can with each choice you make. He would probably agree that we all need to slow down, recharge our batteries, and figure out how to stay spiritually grounded. He would definitely acknowledge that the world can be a harsh place, but we're not alone. He would be absolutely certain that God is with us every step of the way.

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