

## RELEASING THE GRIP- Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent

March 5, 2017

Cambodian villagers have a practice for catching monkeys. They make a box, with a hole slightly larger than a monkey's fist. Then they put a sweet nut inside the box. A monkey comes along, reaches inside, grasps the nut, then- holding on to the nut- can't remove his hand. More often than not, the monkey sits there with his hand in the box.

Lent is a time to let go of what we clutch, and what clutches us, to let go not only of "all evil and notorious sins" as our litany bids, but of the sweet nuts as well- perhaps a sweet grievance we love to stroke daily. I have a few I'm working on- a little peat fires of anger on which I steadily blow air to keep burning. Where would I be if I didn't burn this way? Does my anger define me more than my gratitude? It's no good trying to let go, unless there's someone outside the box inviting me, releasing my grip- an expulsive attraction to a new companionship.

Adam and Eve in the garden play out the drama. Adamah, the first word for Adam, embraces both male and female. Adamah is our humanity in the garden. The Lord said you may eat of every tree, but the one at the center. You cannot *own, grasp and know* the tree at the center of the garden. But the snake, the little snake inside all of us, said, "Oh, yes you can! You can have it all. You can KNOW." Well, we know what happened. Adam and Eve ate. They lost their innocence. Flaming swords fell across the garden.

Loving precedes true knowing. Loving and beholding precedes true understanding. We can only love WHAT and WHO we do not fully grasp and know. We put great emphasis on knowing and being informed. But loving comes first. *Beholding* and being held, in relationship precedes *grasping* in knowledge. First we behold. First we love and are loved. Then we come to know who we are and Whose we are.

Adam and Eve want to grasp all, and loose the loving relationship to the One at the center. Christ restores the relationship. He doesn't want to have it all. He wants to live in God's grace. Even the fully resurrected Christ doesn't have it all. He lives in the grace and mutual sharing of the Trinity- Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. The temptations are all about the offer to grasp and have it all: goods, power, and knowledge. "Turn these stones into bread," said the tempter. "No I live in God's care, who gives us each day our daily bread," says Christ. "Go to the heights, seize the power, and soar," says the tempter. "Do not put God to the test. Keep me held in the relationships," says Christ. "Here, have all the kingdoms

of the world,” says the tempter. “Worship the Lord and stay in his care,” says Christ.

Lent is a time to renew our relationship with who and what really counts. Jesus came down from the mountain and found twelve friends. He called Peter, James, and John as companions. Together they made their way through the countryside to Jerusalem, the capital and seat of power. *We* are called to come out of our mountains or caves of isolation and find such friends. Find those who can help, keep us on track- who care enough to tell us when we’re going astray.

I can’t make this journey alone. I can’t let go and let God alone. I’ll keep gripping my addictions, my well nurtured grievances, my familiar arguments. I’ll be stuck in the box unless I have a trusted friend to take my open and trembling hand, to guide me to new relationships. God gives us Christ’s fellowship to open the way. So find a friend. Find a friend you trust. Befriend one of the books we have for Lent. They are trustworthy authors.

We often think of Lent, and releasing the burdens of sin, as a personal journey. Remember what we do in prayer, and in fellowship, ripples outward. Christ didn’t stay in the hills. He went to give witness to the seats of power, to the Roman legions in Jerusalem, that the way of military might is not the ultimate way of peace. While we need force to resist evil, we can’t bomb someone or country into a relationship. When the devil took Christ to the mountain, he showed him the kingdoms of the world, and said “All these I give you if you will worship me.” Christ walked down the mountain to be in solidarity with the villagers, to heal, feed, welcome, and restore our humanity. Lent is a time for us to come off our separate mountains, to seek each other, and listen to our neighbors just outside our doors. May God release in us the gift of a holy Lent, through Christ our Lord.

Then we can come to know within the mutual beholding. Knowing without beholding is empty, even cruel. It’s said the Frenchman Rene Descartes is the father of modern philosophy and critical science. He said, “I think, therefore I am.” I can be distantly objective. What’s more important is, “I am loved, and love, therefore I am.”