

The temptation that Jesus struggles with and the temptation that maybe we all are faced with is the temptation to allow some outside force or outside voice to determine who we are and what we do and what it is that we most want instead of the internal still small voice that is the micro-presence of God within us.

We all want to matter, we all want to count, don't we? The central question is: whose definition of mattering, whose determination of what it means to count are we going to live by?

We've already read about Jesus' baptism, a few weeks ago when Jesus got confirmation of the fact that he mattered and counted. Remember, John baptizes him in the River Jordan and a voice comes from heaven saying "this is my beloved son with whom I am well-pleased". And all those people standing around the river are perking up and taking notice – could this actually be the One we have been waiting for? And then what happens? Does Jesus begin performing miracles and preaching to the masses and wowing people into understanding that "yes, in fact, I am the Messiah"? I mean you could hardly ask for a more dramatic entrance.

But it doesn't happen like that does it? Jesus gets this internal affirmation of who he is, his worth as God's beloved son, there in the waters of the river and then he is immediately whisked off into the wilderness as far from people as possible and as Mark, Matthew and Luke attest to he is tempted by what they call Satan, or the Deceiver. In other words he is immediately assaulted by that force in the world, that force within us, that seeks to draw us out of that still small center of who we are and whose we are, that force that deludes us and tempts us to believe that our true identity, our true worth and value comes from other places other than our one true source: God.

Don't you know that force, that power, to which they are referring? It's probably not all that helpful to think in terms of a red being with horns and a pitchfork, no more helpful than it is to think of God as a big white man with a beard sitting on clouds in heaven. But there is this power in the world and maybe too close within us for comfort at times that distracts us from who we truly are and what we truly desire and lures us or tempts us by saying things like:

“psst, over here! This is what you should want. This is what you should do. This is what will really make you matter. This is how you will really count.”

And there are times that many of us have stood there looking over at those things and thinking – “really? But this is what I really desire. This is who I thought I was.”

“No, that’s wrong.” The Deceiver says, “that desire is no good. That you is too small and insignificant. That’s not important enough. That’s not good enough. Seriously, check this out. **THIS** is what will make you matter.”

Something like this was what was going on for Jesus in the wilderness and as ancient and strange as the story of the devil’s tempting of Jesus might sound at first, it is a struggle we must all face. Satan says to Jesus – eh, don’t listen to that voice from heaven saying you are beloved, change this stone into bread to take care of yourself, grab all this power for yourself, do something spectacular like throwing yourself off this precipice and have God save you then you will know you are really loved. It’s these things that will confirm that you *really* count and *actually* matter and it’s through these spectacular things that you will earn and even command respect and love.

What are the Satanic or deceptive voices inside each of us? Are they parental voices or societal voices that we have internalized and shame us away from who we truly are to who others think we should be. This might sound cynical and too harsh but I’m pretty sure that parents often have the need for their children to be successful and accomplished and happy in a large part to make up for their own deficits and sense of lacking in themselves. How many of us have done what we do, are the way we are because of the expectations of our parents? Some of us have fulfilled and met those expectations and others of us have done the exact opposite of those expectations because they were so oppressive. But either way you go, I would guess that many of us at some point in our lives have been too determined by the parental voices in our heads and as a result neglected the still small voice of our true selves that is the voice of God within?

But we parents don’t corner the market by any means, for the same can be asked about the societal voices around us. We have been told what success is and what it means to matter in this culture. Daily if not hourly we are bombarded with messages from our culture that tell us how we can make ourselves count. Drive this. Wear that. Drink this. Shop there. Smell like this. Look like that. Desire this and want that. Then

you'll matter. Then you'll count. And many of us assume we are immune to such "come ons" from our mass media and yet the media wouldn't do it unless it was an effective and powerful way to influence who we are and what we do. And so the question that I think is worth pondering is just how much of who we are is influenced and determined by who God made us to be and how much by how the culture around us wants us to be? Could the Satanic voice that deceives us away from our true selves be located in our surrounding culture?

I think it's a really really important question because I think our true selves, our God-oriented selves, tend to get short shrifted within us. I think our God-oriented selves often don't get as fair a hearing. They don't get as much air-time as the voices of the others who have their own idea of who we should be and what we should be about.

And so before his public ministry, Jesus goes into the wilderness for a time of fasting and prayer and faces down the other who is saying this is what you should do and should be about if you want to matter, if you want to count. And in fact, as the theologian James Alison points out, every time Jesus goes off by himself to pray it's often following some big public miracle or preaching gig suggesting that his prayer is often about remembering who he is and Whose he is despite all the pressure around him from the crowds who want him to be for them who they want him to be. The most agonizing moment of prayer for Jesus – in the Garden of Gethsemane - is exactly at that point just before Jesus is about to go and do what everyone around him does not want him to do. They have their own designs on him and what he should do and be as their Messiah and it takes everything in him to maintain his-true-self to get in touch and stay in touch with that still small voice within him that is the whisperings of the living God, speaking to him of who he is and what he is called to do.

And so we have our model and our example of what we need to do to discern between the voices around us and the voice that is true to us, the God-presence within. If it wasn't easy for Jesus to discern that and keep at bay the voices of the others and maintain his alignment to the voice of God then we shouldn't necessarily expect it to be easy for us either.

But a first step is to acknowledge in the first place that we have these competing forces within and around us - one that continually lures us towards our Source and our

true selves and one that lures and deceives us away. It's a good first step to even pose the question as to whether who we are and what we do, what we want, comes from the very heart source and center of ourselves or from some other source. Then it seems, if we are to take Jesus as our example, we've got to pray on it. We've got to be still and quiet and contemplative for long enough to hear the more subtle tones of God reverberating through the harsher overtones of everything else. What do I really want? Is this true to me? What I am really being called to do? And then the third and final step is to have the courage to stay just where we are because we have discerned that this is where we need to be despite the voices around us telling us something different or the courage to change and do what we are called to do despite the other voices telling us that we need to just stay the same.

Just one last thing in closing – I don't mean to set the voice of God over and against the voice of others because obviously we hear the voice of God often through the voice of others. Jesus heard it through the voice of scripture, which is what he used to ward off Satan. And often we need the healthy discerning voices of friends and community to help us discern the true voice of God within. But still it is in those places of quiet and prayer and contemplation where we take the words of our friends and family and even our enemies and hold them up to the light of God as best we are able and it's there still that we will most likely be able to find the needed clarity and strength to live who we are called to be in a world that often has other designs on us.