

Temptations and Delights to the Eye

Lent 1-A

March 13, 2011

Have you ever had buyer's remorse? You know what I mean: you're out walking around in a new fabric store or a new hardware store or a new bookstore or a new electronics outlet, and you keep seeing things you didn't even know you wanted. Maybe you go to the Foothills Craft Guild show in Knoxville, and you see a hand-made mug in a shape or a glaze that's remarkable—a delight to the eyes, and it's a little expensive, but hey—it's handmade, it's the only one there is, and it certainly would be cheery, full of hot coffee in the mornings. Or you go to Lowe's for a can of paint and some brushes and just happen to walk through the power tools section, where there's a sale on the router of your dreams. It surely would make that woodworking project turn out a whole lot better, and that would really please the wife, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it?

We've all done it. We've all been out strolling around in some new garden of delights— whatever that is for us— and found just the thing we didn't know we needed. It was a delight to our eye, the way that apple was to Eve, and good for some real need—real need!—or at least one of our favorite fantasies. So we bought it, quickly, and came home proud. Until buyer's remorse set in. Maybe the mug had a matte glaze that got stained by coffee rings every time it was used. Maybe the big, new power tool had 157 accessories you can't keep up with and will never do enough projects to use. Maybe the price actually wasn't much of a sale, after all, or the item was so poorly made that it broke about three days after the warranty ran out. Admit it, our eyes lead us into temptation sometimes. We're so taken with the “new look” or the shiny paint or the soft sheen of “fine Corinthian leather” that we make our decision without consulting our spouse or our cupboard space or our

checkbook or even honoring our soul's intent to simplify, simplify, simplify. "See it, like it, get it" our excited eye says. And we do, without consulting any other opinions, even the opinion of our more detached, reasonable self.

There are worse things than buying something beautiful or something useful, or something that exactly matches our mental picture of what's "cool." But all our incidents of buyer's remorse tell us something of how easy it is to be tempted by otherwise good things. Things, after all, are neutral. Toward what purpose we spend our attention, our energy, our resources, our fantasies, our hopes—that's another question. God gives us those capacities to dream, to desire, and to do. God declares them very good, along with the rest of creation. And God directs us to aim them toward tending creation as its caretakers, not just its takers.

By God's mercy, our eyes can be opened to the garden of delights already given to us. We may wake up to the truth of whose territory we live in, simply as guests. Better yet, we may wake up to the truth that nothing less than gratitude—the kind of delight that moves us to awe and generosity—will ever satisfy our real hunger. Beauty, pleasure, wisdom—these are gifts worthy of Eden, and God has invited us to receive and tend them, but here's the challenge—can we recognize the beauties, pleasures, and wisdom already around us and can we learn to use them by trusting God's guidance more than our own? Can we recognize that Eden is not real estate we can buy or bargain for?

That's exactly what Jesus is clear about, when the Spirit led him into the wilderness, where his vision of life as God's Beloved Son would be tested. This time, it's not a snake who offers tempting wares but the one called, "Ha-Satan," the Adversary, the Deceiver, the Liar. He tempts the famished Jesus with turning stones into food, but Jesus knows there are bigger things at stake than his immediate hunger. There's the taunt that if he's really God's Son he has power to do whatever he wants. Jesus sees the difference—being God's Son means *exactly*

that God's purposes are the focus of Jesus' thought, word, and deeds. Jesus knows the difference, too, between loyalty to God and challenging God to prove loyalty to him. Jesus sees clearly that the Kingdoms of the World are neither his to rule nor Satan's to give—they are all God's from the beginning, under God's dominion, as far as the eye can see, even from the top of that high mountain. Jesus sees the difference between looking down at the riches of the world and looking up at them in worship. Like Moses on Mt. Pisgah, Jesus can see clearly what is God's to care for and not his to claim for himself.

It's funny how our vision changes over time. We can go from seeing with a child's clear eye to nearsightedness that brings us glasses, to astigmatism, to presbyopia (the after-40 changes that make it hard to read the small type on restaurant menus), to cataracts, to even the loss of eyesight through stroke or glaucoma. Our spiritual vision changes, too. Instead of losing our sight, by God's grace, we may actually sharpen our spiritual sight.

One reason we sing the Great Litany today and process around and around the congregation is to draw a clear picture of who and whose we are. We circle around and around the assembly, praying these ancient petitions in an ancient way to wrap the whole community in prayers for God's mercy on our wayward hearts and deeds and to ask God's protection on our whole lives—from women in childbirth to those about to die, from those who have been faithful to those who don't even realize they are *unfaithful*. We pray for protection and providence on God's whole world, from Japan to New Zealand to Haiti to New Orleans. Processing around and around the congregation as we sing the Great Litany embodies, incarnates the oneness of our broken world and the oneness of our need for God.

That's why processing the Great Litany is a great way to start Lent— it gives us a clear vision of our common need for God's dominion in us, around us, and

beyond us. We are bound up together in our sins, in our forgiveness, in our powerlessness, and in God's providence.

That's a vision we can turn to when we are "tossed about with many a tempest, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without," as we sang last Wednesday. We need this reminder, not only in Lent, that we are neither in charge nor helplessly alone. We don't have to go shopping for beauty, pleasure, and wisdom. We can learn to see, as Jesus did, that they are already given. And when our sin and the world's chaos seem ever before us, we can turn, together, to the one whose mercy never comes to an end.

Lord, have mercy upon us.