

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
February 21, 2010
Luke 4:1-13

“Good things come from hard work...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

When our son Sasha was growing up he found many things hard to do. He was not very good at skate boarding or playing basketball but he wanted so much to skateboard and play basketball so he would work at it and try and practice and get discouraged and give up and try again. And I would always tell him, “Sasha, good things come from hard work.”

And Sasha wanted to play the drum set and he started taking lessons and then he slowly recognized that when drumming your four limbs sometimes have to do four different things. He wanted so much to play the drum set but he got discouraged and he wanted to give up, and I told him, “Sasha good things come from hard work.”

And when he was in high school he wanted to go on to college and so he wanted to get high scores on his SAT exams. But the first time around he did not get high scores on his SAT exams and we hired a tutor to work with him and he hated the tutoring sessions, he hated spending his Saturday mornings doing math problems and English comprehension tests and he complained endlessly and I told him, “Sasha good things come from hard work.”

And then Sasha went off to college. And he wanted to be a music major but he did not know how to read music. He was a drummer and drum music is annotated in beats not notes. So Sasha began learning to read music in college so he could be a music major. He took class after class in music theory and aural skills and sight reading. Hard class after hard class. And he struggled enormously.

Now Sasha is a college senior. And for his senior project he is writing the music to a film being made by another senior who is a film major.

And this week, Sasha sent his Dad and me pages of sheet music for the film—music that he composed and wrote out. Pages of music he was able to write. And he enclosed a little note.

All the note says is:

“Good things come from hard work. Thanks Mom.”

I am telling you this story because it is Lent. And your Lenten discipline may involve things that are hard for you. And so I say to you:

Good things come from hard work.

We may during Lent decide to get up earlier every day and read a devotional book or the Bible or meditate or pray.

But our beds are cozy and warm and maybe skipping one day or two or five won't really matter.

But it's Lent and we said we would do that, we said we would get up early every day and that's what we are going to do.

Remember: good things come from hard work.

We may during Lent decide to volunteer more at the cot shelter program or at the hospital or at the Council on Aging or to sing every week at Linda Manor or to deliver meals to shut-ins but we are tired and busy and it's supposed to snow this week and who wants to drive around on snowy roads and who cares if I miss a day or two or a week or two.

But it's Lent and we said we would do more volunteer work in the community and that's what we are going to do.

Remember: good things come from hard work.

Good things come from hard work.

And good things WILL come from your Lenten discipline if you take it seriously and adhere to it. Good things will come....like a renewal of your faith, like a new closeness with God, like a sense of being loved and listened to, like a feeling of being of service, like an awareness that you can be disciplined for God and with God and that you can experience new energy and self-control.

Good things come from hard work.

This week I had a meeting with Toby about a number of things. At the end of the meeting we were talking about a show in New York City that I wish Toby and Moore could see and Toby rather casually said that he could not go to New York to see the show during Lent because he and Moore had agreed that for Lent this year they would give up buying anything.

I paused when Toby said that. I paused and thought: that's a novel idea. And I while I paused I quickly reviewed in my mind some of the many things I had bought THAT very day (coffee, a bagel, two books, soup, moisturizing lotion, toilet paper, Kleenex).

Once I came back to current time and was able to speak I asked Toby to tell me more.

"Well," Toby said in a matter-of-fact fashion, "cmoore and I simply are not buying anything during Lent. It's a good practice."

"How are you eating?" I said unable to believe people could survive without going to coffee shops and cafes.

"Oh we did a big shopping before Lent, and we put so much food by this summer that we can live on that, plus we have our CSA food each week which is all pre-paid, and we have huge quantities of flour and wheat berries and other grains."

Toby was calm. And I don't even know what a wheatberry is.

"Oh," I said, now more amazed than ever.

"So you cannot go to New York and see a play because you cannot buy the tickets."

"Right," said Toby, "or buy any food while there. Now cmoore and I take our lunch to work, and when we have an evening commitment right after work we pack our dinner too and eat in the staff room and then go on to our evening meeting."

"This is fabulous," I said. "You will learn and experience so much. This practice interrupts your daily life, demands that you be so attentive to every aspect of your daily living. This makes so much room for an awareness of God in your life. This is hard and it is great." I wanted to say: Toby, good things come from hard work. But I didn't. I was thinking about how I had never canned one food item in my entire life, and I don't know what a wheatberry is.

If Toby and cmoore can give up buying anything at all for 40 days (oh, I forgot, gas for their car is the one exception) then I can get up a little earlier 3 days a week to see the sunrise on Mt. Tom. Suddenly my Lenten discipline seemed quite tame and easy, especially since I can buy hot coffee and a muffin on the way home.

Today's reading from the Book of Luke is the story of the temptation. After being baptized by John in the River Jordan, Jesus is "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness where he fasts and prays for forty days. Then the devil comes to him and tempts him. Jesus is hungry—filled with the Spirit of God but hungry. And so the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Oh how tempting, oh how delicious.

Oh my.

But Jesus has worked hard to become a pure and cleansed vessel, filled with the Spirit of God and so he answers, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

The temptation story coupled with Sasha's note from college, "Good things come from hard work," made me think about what pulls us off our center, what tempts us, what makes us deviate from the path that leads us to God.

I think that obvious temptations cause us to turn away from God...there are temptations in our lives that beckon us to do things that we know are wrong or simply fill our hearts and souls with distracting, unhelpful junk....temptations like alcohol, drugs, promiscuous sex, or more benign activities like too much TV, too much food, too much gossip, too much of anything that fills us up and leaves little room internally for the Spirit to take hold and guide our thoughts and behaviors.

But I think there is another form of temptation that lets us avoid religious practices we have committed to—the practices of prayer, meditation, and service. That form of temptation is the temptation to avoid hard work. I think each day we are tempted to simply avoid the hard work that being faithful requires. We can busy ourselves out of the hard work of attending to our spiritual needs. We can busy ourselves out of the practice of spending time with God.

Temptation seems to come in two forms:

One: things we do that fill us with junk that clogs our once-clear vessel inside so the Spirit cannot get any traction in there to guide our lives.

Two: things we avoid doing that would fill our vessel inside so that we are overflowing with the Spirit and that Spirit influences our thinking and directs our actions.

Temptation comes in two forms:

We are tempted to do things that are unhealthy for our spiritual lives

And we are tempted to avoid doing things that are healthy for our spiritual lives.

Being faithful to a spiritual practice is hard work. And Lent is a time when we are particularly called to do that hard work.

Lent is a time when we are called to self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, acts of service, generosity and meditation...all hard work.

But the rewards of a disciplined spiritual practice are many.

Just ask Toby.

Ask him how aware he is of God every morning when he packs his lunch and dinner before leaving the house to go to work.

Ask him how aware he is of God when he sits with cmoore in the staff room at work eating his lunch from his lunchbox and not buying a cookie or soda or candy bar from the vending machine to top off his meal.

We have choices.

Not every week, not every day, but every hour.

We have choices.

We make choices every hour that either give the Spirit of God more or less room in our inner life, in our clear vessel, in our soul.

And we can make HARD choices that require discipline, that invite the Spirit in to set up tents and make camp in our inner life. We can let the Spirit fill our thoughts and dominate our actions, and then we see what happens with our lives.

But it's hard.

It is just hard.

To be a clear, disciplined vessel receiving God's love and grace and spreading that love and grace out to all those with whom you meet, work and live, that's hard stuff. Disciplined hard stuff.

But in the end all I have to say is:

Good things come from hard work.

Amen.