

First Sunday of Lent – February 14, 2016

The CEO has brought a young man to the board meeting. The hospitals in this large Catholic system are hurting financially. The young man has cleverly designed a downsizing strategy. He lays out his plan. Board members ask questions. But even the questions show that the board is well on its way to adopting the proposal. A religious sister on the board raises her hand and asks: “How are you going to do this?”

The young man is silent. He has not thought much about this, and, to the extent that he has, it would be pink slips through the office mail. Suddenly, the focus is not on the survival of the hospitals but on the survival of the people who will be let go. A long and labored board discussion begins on how to do this very difficult but necessary thing. What are the values that will guide their decision making?

This scenario reflects the way the Gospel is brought forward into contemporary Christian life. We distill values from the gospels and try to have them influence how we do things. Are gospel values evident in the decisions we make in education, health care, family life, community life, political and social life? For many people it seems, just to ask this question is startlingly new and often uncomfortable. Also, it's often not clear how ancient documents are immediately applicable to current situations.

If we look at today's gospel which we might call Jesus' wilderness exam, we might find some examples of false values that should be rejected.

In the first temptation Satan suggests that people can be appeased if their physical needs are met. Everyone knows that “bread and circuses” is a proven form of people control. Promise them they will be full and safe, and they will let you get away with anything. That's what people want, so give it to them.

In the second temptation Satan suggests that demonizing others and dividing people from one another is the best way to power and glory. Do your best to keep people fighting with one another. Thus you can do yo7ur own plundering without ever looking at yourself in the mirror.

In the third temptation the devil suggests that credentials are more important than the way a person actually thinks and acts. Show is always to be preferred over substance. Wealth, style, or cleverness is the best recommendation for anything.

The devil did his best to seduce Jesus into using strategies that looked like they might further his ambitions. But Jesus saw them for what they were – betrayals of his identity – and he refused them. It remains to be seen if we, with Jesus' help, can do the same.