

First Sunday in Lent, Year A
April 26, 2011 ~ Matthew 4:1-11
Fr. Jim Cook

“Firm Centers, Soft Edges, and a Satisfying Life.”

Some people have a real problem with the season of Lent, because they see it as a time when, in order to enhance their spiritual life or journey, they feel obliged to either take on some onerous task, or give up something dear to them.

And it gets worse. If they fail in whatever they’ve undertaken, they feel guilty. But, if they succeed, they feel proud. And then they get this sinking feeling that, whether they succeeded or failed, the pride they feel for succeeding, or the guilt they feel for failing, are things that need to be confessed. So you can see why Lent is not a happy time for some people.

If you feel that way about Lent, I have good news for you: It doesn’t need to be that way. Lent doesn’t need to be quite so difficult or problematic, because I have a couple of ideas for how you can have a challenging yet fulfilling Lent; that is, if you’re willing to put forth the time and effort to see it through.

So, here it is: Let me first suggest that you **take on** the discipline of attending worship every Sunday in Lent, and stay for coffee hour. And then, second, let me suggest that you **give up** all of the reasons and excuses you might have for why you cannot do this.

Now, if you’re tempted to dismiss my suggestion, wait because I have two reasons for my suggestion. First, I recently read an article in the *Christian Century* magazine that described a survey of American adults, conducted from 2006 to 2007. From that survey it was learned that people who attend religious services regularly, and build friendships within their congregation, **tend to find their lives more satisfying**. While I didn’t expect that, I’m really not all that surprised.

The survey also revealed something else I didn’t expect: That the strength of a person’s religious convictions, and any private religious practices they might entertain, such as prayer, did not, in and of themselves, lead to more satisfying lives. I didn’t see that coming.

However, what does make a difference are two things: first, having a strong sense of religious identity and belonging; and, second, forging friendships within a person's faith community. The authors of the study write: "It is neither faith nor communities, *per se*, that are important, but communities of faith. For life satisfaction, praying together seems to be better than either bowling together or praying alone."

Now, I bring this to your attention because, as your pastor, I am only too aware that so many of you have things going on *in* your lives that have a tendency to drain the satisfaction *from* your lives, and you need something that can tip those scales back in the other direction. Apparently, regular attendance at worship, and forging friendships within your church (that's why I included staying for coffee hour), can do just that.

That's the first reason for my suggestion. The second reason came about from my reading of today's gospel reading. In that reading, Jesus has just completed a forty-day span of fasting and prayer — so he's probably feeling tired and weakened by the experience, but he also has a heightened awareness of the presence of God in his life. All of a sudden, there's Satan tossing one temptation after another — one stumbling block after another — into his path. But how does Jesus react? By my reading, Jesus seems totally unfazed by it all. In fact, his response seems thoughtful and measured.

When I was thinking about that, I remembered my father-in-law's description of how people can often fit into one of two groups, and those two groups are defined by the sort of people within them. Those in the first group are people with a firm center and soft edges, and those in the second group have a soft center and hard edges.

People with a firm center and soft edges are those who have a sure and certain faith, and an absolute trust and confidence in their relationship with God. As a result of this firm center, they develop soft edges, which means they can navigate through life and relationships without leaving wounded or hurting people in their wake.

However, those in the second group are the opposite of those in the first. Because they lack a sure and certain faith, and because their relationship with God does not have that absolute trust and confidence, they find themselves feeling uncertain and insecure. As a result of this soft center, they try to protect themselves by developing hard edges. And that means that, when they navigate through life and relationships, they do, in fact, leave in their wake people who are wounded or who have been hurt.

Now, one final feature distinguishing these two groups of people is this: Actions taken by those with firm centers and soft edges always seem to originate from within, and are based upon the foundation of their faith and relationship with God. However,

actions taken by those with soft centers and hard edges always seem to be in response to, or in reaction to, things that happen around them, or things they perceive are happening to them.

The way I recall my father-in-law describing these two groups, he made it sound as if you're either in the one group or in the other. However, I suspect that each group is actually at the opposite end of a continuum, and all of us fit somewhere in between, moving in one direction or the other. And here's the thing: the description of Jesus in today's gospel, and in so many other gospel accounts, leads me to believe that he is a fully realized firm-centered and soft-edged person, and that those of us who are somewhere between the two extremes should find our lives moving in the direction that leads us towards Jesus.

Here's my point: I believe the person who is fully invested in their faith community, who has deep roots and fast friends in that community, and who worships and prays and studies regularly with that community, will inevitably develop firmer centers and softer edges. They become, in other words, more and more like Jesus. And that's my second reason for suggesting this Lenten discipline of coming to worship every Sunday, and staying for coffee hour.

Some of you, I know, simply won't be able to do what I'm suggesting for any number of legitimate reasons. But I suspect that the vast majority of us could actually do what I suggest. Yes, it would probably require some shifting of things on your personal and family calendars. Yes, it might require making some tough choices. But I believe that the potential payoff would more than make up for any inconvenience.

Now, if you're already doing what I'm suggesting — if you already attend worship every Sunday, and if you've already forged deep and significant relationships here — then you already know what I'm talking about. However, since you're already doing what I am suggesting, I have another suggestion for you, and it's this: Invite and encourage other people you know, who aren't already involved in a community of faith, to come to church with you during the season of Lent. Use this season as a time when you can help others find the same satisfaction and fulfillment you yourself have already found here. I believe that is a good use of your time and energies, and a real gift to family and friends.

Finally, I know that there will be some who will respond to my suggestion with something akin to an "Oh, my God, *every* Sunday? No way!" Please know that I'm absolutely fine with that. And if your life is sufficiently satisfying for you, and if you have firm enough centers and soft enough edges, then you have my blessings and my

congratulations. But if you do want more of this in your life, at least pray about what I am suggesting. That's all I ask.

In the meantime, I wish you all a blessed season of Lent. And I wish you all of the satisfaction and fulfillment, and all of the joy, and peace and comfort that comes from being a part of this community of faith.

Amen.