

## **“Hollow Leg Spirituality”**

Matthew 4:1-11,  
First Sunday in Lent (A), March 9, 2014

**One man recalls that when he was a boy, his grandmother often accused him of having a “hollow leg.”** This was **especially true** when they were seated at the **dinner table**, particularly on a **Sunday for the noon meal**. After attending the **Sunday morning worship services at church** with his family, there was always a **big Sunday dinner to follow**; most always hosted by his parents in the home where he grew up. It was the noon meal to which his grandparents always had a **standing invitation**.

**As the food was being passed around the table** (clock-wise, but never counter clock-wise, mind you!), he would just **pile his plate absolutely full of such foods** as fried chicken, mashed potatoes, turnip greens and corn. And then, he would proceed to **“polish off” that plate of food**. Minutes later, he was reaching for seconds, and about the time when he was now **polishing off his third plate heaped full of food**, this is when his grandmother would turn to him with a big smile on her face and say: **“Tommy, you must have a hollow leg!”**

His grandmother was simply making a **joke**, she thought, about the **great vacancy that always seemed to be there in her grandson’s lower extremities**, but for a few years, when Tommy was only 7 or 8 years old, he interpreted his grandmother’s words literally and this truly troubled him. Could his grandmother be right? He would **reach down and put his hand on his own leg**. It certainly seemed to be full of bones and tissues and blood vessels and the like, so how could he possibly be suffering from a hollow leg?

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS, I AM SHARING THIS LITTLE STORY** with you as a reminder to you and me that we are very much living in what sociologists call a **“CONSUMERIST SOCIETY” TODAY**. We consume so much of what the world has to offer, that we might begin to wonder if we have **hollow legs ourselves, in addition to hollow arms and torsos!**

We **FILL OURSELVES UP WITH FAST FOOD AND FAST CARS, ALL THE WHILE BUYING STUFF THAT WE TELL OURSELVES WE NEED, BUT WE MOST OFTEN REALLY DON’T NEED AT ALL.** – **But friends, please do not misunderstand me:** I am not suggesting for one minute here this morning, **that our God is a killjoy**. For you know how Paul tells Timothy to minister faithfully to those believers in his congregation at Ephesus who have been blessed with a **VERY HIGH STANDARD OF LIVING**.

Paul tells Timothy: *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy!”* (1 Timothy 6:17) These words of Paul, of course, follow on the heels of one of the most often misquoted verses in the whole Bible. In **I TIMOTHY 6:10**, Paul writes: *“For the love of money is a root from which all evils spring; and some, in their reaching out after it, have been sadly led astray, and have pierced themselves with many pains!”*

**Today is the First Sunday in Lent, and always on the First Sunday in Lent the church focuses our attention,** once again, on the great significance of our Lord's being led up out of the Jordan River, immediately after he was baptized by John, by the Holy Spirit and driven out into the wilderness where he will be tempted by Satan for forty days and forty nights.

**At the heart of each of these temptation experiences, is Satan's attempt to lead our Lord Jesus Christ into a life of disobedience and sin,** in the same way that that he as that old crafty and conniving serpent beguiled our first parents at creation's dawn, into a life of disobedience and sin, thereby **plummeting them into lives that are now estranged from God; alienated from the God who had created them.**

The **strategy of the old evil foe is well known to us,** but often completely unrecognizable to us, because of our spiritual shortsightedness no matter how often he uses it on us. He takes the **Word of God which God has given us in the Holy Scriptures and that Word of God that we have heard and twists it.** He reshapes it. He recasts it into a mold of his own making.

**"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'"**  
**Why this is not what the LORD God said to our first parents at all!**

**"Did God actually say, 'Money is the root of all evil!'"?** No, this is not what the LORD God said at all. The LORD God said, "The **LOVE** of money is the root from which all evils spring."

**It all comes down to the question always: "Who is your God?"** And Jesus brings this whole subject to a head for us, when he says in Matthew 6:24: **"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon!"**

And the word "mammon" here, which is a direct transliteration of the Greek into English, as translated in the King James Version, is not exclusively money but anything that would usurp the living God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—from off of the throne of our hearts and put something else there instead, or someone else there instead, and oftentimes, it is our own selves there instead!

In this season of Lent, we are being called upon by the Church, to get serious, very serious, once again (at least for a while), about our relationship with God. And it's Jesus who teaches us also in his Sermon on the Mount that sometimes the best defense is a good offense. He says, **"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth,**

***where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves breakthrough and steal!”***

**IN THE GOSPEL LESSON THIS MORNING, THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS JESUS INTO THE WILDERNESS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING HIS BAPTISM. AFTER MORE THAN A MONTH IN THE WILDERNESS, 40 DAYS TO BE PRECISE, JESUS IS MET BY SATAN, THE ACCUSER. AND THE DEVIL CERTAINLY CANNOT PASS UP SUCH A JUICY OPPORTUNITY FOR TEMPTATION.**

***“See that rock over there!” says the tempter. “I bet you could turn that rock into bread and fill yourself up!”***

***“Bread alone can’t sustain you,” Jesus says. “But every Word that God speaks gives sustenance to human beings and their souls!”***

Then taking Jesus to the very pinnacle of the temple, Satan says to our Lord: ***“See the ground way down there, far below you,” says the tempter. “I bet you could jump off in faith and be caught securely in the arms of your Heavenly Father’s administering angels who would never even let you cut your foot on a stone!”***

***“I’m not going to jump off the temple,” Jesus says. “I don’t need to test God to trust God.”***

Then taking our Lord Jesus to the top of a very high mountain, the accuser says to him: ***“See the kingdoms spread all over the world,” says the tempter. “I bet you’d be the most famous ruler of all of those kingdoms who ever lived if you would just sell your soul to me, swear your ultimate allegiance, that is, to me.”***

***“I’m not going to bow down to you,” Jesus says. “I serve God, and only God instills in me the desire to worship.”***

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WHEN YOU TAKE TIME OUT TO STOP AND THINK ABOUT IT, THESE THREE TEMPTATIONS ARE WHAT THE SATANIC HOSTS OF THAT OLD EVIL FOE MIGHT LABEL AS “THE INDUSTRY STANDARD.”**

***“Worrying about getting stuff, getting security, and getting fame – they’ve worked for centuries!”*** the devil may even be saying to himself out loud. ***“Surely, they will work on this Jesus fellow too, especially given the fact that Jesus has already been out in this wilderness for forty days. I’ve got him right where I want him!”*** boasts the devil. “Surely, these industry standard temptations about stuff, security, and fame will work on a guy who has been living out in the elements alone with no food for forty days!

**Of course, the industry standard temptations fail. Jesus isn’t worried about getting stuff or being secure or finding fame.** Why not? Well, the easy answer is that **JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD AND THEREFORE MORE THAN A MATCH FOR TEMPTATION.** But that’s not much help to you and me, so try this on for size. Rather than becoming a benefit to the devil in the devil’s attempted temptations, **Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness actually helps not the tempter, but Jesus himself.**

**You see, Jesus wasn't just killing time during those forty days. He wasn't twiddling his thumbs waiting for the devil to turn up. Jesus was fasting. And the thought behind the whole practice of fasting as a spiritual discipline was to make a space; to open up a hole within ourselves. A fast is an active and difficult denial of something that has influence over us (traditionally food, though fasts certainly are not limited to that area).**

When we fast, we forego the things that we usually use to fill us up, the things that we depend on to keep us going. And when we cease to fill ourselves up with all the junk of the world or all the anxiety about our own security or all our envy of the famous – when we cease to fill ourselves up with these things, we make room within ourselves for God.

**Unfortunately we are living in a day when over 50% of American people no longer claim any affiliation with a Christian church of any stripe, size, or color. Yet, there are probably 2/3 of that 50% who reject any real association with the church who declare to be SPBR, “Spiritual but not religious!”** (Books such as Robert C. Fuller's *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (ISBN 0-19-514680-8) and Sven E. Erlandson's *Spiritual But Not Religious: A Call To Religious Revolution In America* (ISBN 0-595-01108) highlight the emerging usage of the term.)

In January 2012, Jefferson Bethke furthered the SBNR movement with his YouTube film **"Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus,"** in which he criticized organized religion as superficial and hypocritical; a You Tube presentation that within its first year has received more than 26 million hits on the Internet. Many SBNR adherents claim that it is impossible to have a spiritual relationship with God and follow organized religion. Of course in doing so, the Word of God loses its central place of importance among such people as to the sole source and norm of all Christian teaching.

**Of course, it's of primary importance to understand that Jesus is not simply setting for us a good example here. He is the One who overpowering Satan, can then offer his perfect life as a sacrifice for our sin on the cross.**

**In Philippians 2, Paul writes: “Even though he was in the form of God he did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself and took on the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, wherefore God has highly exalted him and given him a name above every other name in heaven and on earth!” (Philippians 2:5-11) The name here is “LORD!”**

**So one of the ways that you might to create more space for God himself to come and fill in your life, may be in choosing now to attend the Wednesday Lenten services at Mount Olive. I know that there are always those people who do live a great distance away from our church. But this request is not for 52 Wednesdays of the year, but only 6 Wednesdays of the year. And the good news is that no one has to come here in a horse and buggy. As pastor, I want to encourage to be present with us here as we ponder Jesus' suffering and passion anew.**

**By the way, there is no greater false prophet that the prophet who encourages God's people to give any lesser priority to the things of God, than the top priority in life which they always deserve.**

**In the LUTHERAN BOOK OF WORSHIP, there is a closing collect following communion that has always been one of my favorites: “Almighty God, you gave your Son both as a sacrifice for**

**sin, and a model of the godly life. Enable us always to receive him with thanksgiving, and to conform our lives to his, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord who lives with you and the Holy Spirit; one God, now and forever. Amen”**