

LENT 1 C.15

Luke 4:1-13

The Chicken Catcher

You can't herd cats.

That's a well-known truth.

What many poultry farmers have discovered is
that you can't herd chickens, either.

Pigs are no problem. Cattle are quite cooperative as well.

But chickens? Not only will they not cross the road,
they won't even cross the barnyard in an orderly fashion.

To deal with this difficulty,

poultry farmers have had to pull out their checkbooks
and hire specialized laborers called "***chicken catchers.***"

Their task is to run around inside chicken houses
and grab, by hand, all the crazed chickens they can,
and then stuff them into cages.

These chicken catchers capture 8 billion birds a year,
and the toll is high on both chickens and their catchers.

The birds get roughed up as they are violently grabbed,

and the catchers get scratched and dirtied by the flapping chickens.

Most catchers quit after a few months and head for better jobs —
such as working in toxic waste dumps.

For years, engineers have tried to find an automated answer
to the question of how best to catch chickens.

One bright idea, an invention that seemed inspired
at the time but just didn't work out, was the “***chicken vacuum.***”

Whoosh — suck ‘em up!

But now, after a period of intense research and development,
it seems that the industry has finally come up with a winner.
It's called the PH2000.

This state-of-the-art mechanical chicken harvester
can capture 150 birds per minute,
rivaling the best work of eight skilled human chicken catchers.

The PH2000 is a nine-ton contraption that looks like
a combo airport baggage carousel and Army tank,
and it employs a mechanical ramp, conveyor belt,
chute and set of cages to capture chickens painlessly,

without the panic that comes

from being grabbed by a chicken catcher.

Poultry farmers love it, and even animal-rights groups approve,

since the machine is so kind to the birds.

The only problem is the price of the PH2000:

a cool \$200,000. That's not chicken feed.

Now it's true that most of us

don't have to worry about catching chickens.

The pieces of poultry we want are easy enough to grab

in the refrigerated section of our local supermarket.

But there are certainly some other pesky little critters in our lives

that we have a very tough time capturing, controlling and subduing.

They're called temptations.

The problem with temptations is

that they are so tough to grab, control and cage.

There is nothing wrong with eating good food, for example,

but we are easily tempted to overeat.

There is nothing evil about achievement in the marketplace,
but we fall quickly into destructive ambition and self-gratification,
and sometimes ethics are the first casualty of success.

And so on.

Temptations are as frustrating
as the fleet-footed and fast-flapping fowls
that can drive chicken catchers absolutely crazy.

Fortunately, Jesus gives us a lesson in controlling temptation
in today's passage from Luke.

He shows us how to respond to temptation successfully.

For Jesus, subduing sin is all about relying on Scripture,
staying true to your calling and refusing to put God to the test.

Look at his first temptation (Chicken No. 1, if you will):

the temptation to turn a rock into a loaf of rye (Luke 4:1-4).

The devil knew what he was doing with this one,
since he was well aware that Jesus was famished,

and that God himself had provided bread

for the hungry people of Israel.

On top of this, Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days,

and the Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years,

so it all made perfect sense.

It seemed that Jesus had every right to turn that stone

into a loaf of nutritious bread.

But Jesus grabbed this foul flapping fowl and quickly caged it.

“One does not live by bread alone,” he said to Satan,

remembering the guidance of Deuteronomy 8:3,

“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word

that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

Jesus relied on the guidance of Scripture, not his stomach.

He realized that his calling was to feed others, not himself.

And he refused to draw on his divine power

to perform a miracle that would serve

only his own selfish interests.

But there's another tempting chicken that always seems

to want to come home to roost: the temptation of ambition.

Jesus faced this when the devil showed him

all the kingdoms of the world, and then said,

***“It will all be yours, Jesus ... it will all be under your control
... if you worship me”*** (v. 7).

What a tricky temptation this was, because with all that power,

Jesus could have instituted some incredibly beneficial reforms:

world peace, universal employment, eradication of hunger,

protection of human rights, the establishment of true justice.

There’s just one catch. The devil says: You must worship me.

That’s the problem with ambition.

It requires having to worship someone or something.

It feeds off the ***“fire in the belly,”***

a willingness to ***“kill to get the business,”***

a demonic disregard for people

as you claw your way to the top.

The kingdoms of the world simply cannot be gained

without cutting some corners, breaking some commandments,

drawing some blood.

And so, when you think about it, the devil is absolutely right
when he says that ***“it will all be yours ... if you worship me.”***

But Jesus says, ***“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him’”*** (v. 8).

There is no goal so noble
that it is worth abandoning God along the way.

There is no ambition so pure that it can achieve a godly end
without having God in the process.

There is no true Christian calling
that requires the destruction of others through selfish actions.

On top of this, raw ambition really doesn't work.

It often succeeds only if other people fail,
writes businessman James Autry.

***“But in the community of work, if some fail, most fail,
and all become victims.”*** It is far better, says Autry,
to take people along with you, because
***“the more people you try to take along with you,
the faster you'll get there and the longer you'll stay there.”***

Take people along with you,

instead of stepping on them on the way to the top.

That's what Jesus did, and it's what he calls us to do,

as we worship the Lord and serve only him.

The final seduction involves putting God to the test.

The devil invites Jesus to take a flying leap

off the corner of the temple walls and cites Scripture,

saying that God would

“command his angels concerning you, to protect you”

(v. 10).

That's a lovely thought, and one we want desperately to hold onto

— the conviction that God will protect us,

bear us up, shield us and save us,

as we face the many dangers

of day-to-day life.

There's just one little hitch.

Jesus certainly believed that God would protect him,

but he refused to put God to the test.

For us today, this means we don't test God's constant care

by showing up for exams without studying,

or abusing drink or drugs, or engaging in promiscuous sex.

It's not a sign of sincere faith to behave in self-destructive ways

and then expect God to save our skin.

Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

That's the technique that Jesus used

to put the final chicken in its cage,

and it's an approach that he recommends to us as well.

In the end, it may be true that cats will never be herded,

and chickens will remain horribly hard to handle without a PH2000.

But for those who want to manage temptation,

there is no better approach than relying on Scripture,

staying true to your Christian calling

and refusing to put God to the test.

Temptations may continue to flap around,

but they can't hurt you if you cage them. Amen.

Sources:

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New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991, 63.

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