

March 9, 2014 – First Sunday of Lent
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Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

One of the greatest temptations for those of us who live in comfort, have steady employment, and fulfill our civil, religious and family responsibilities is to do things our way. We often attribute success to our individual way of doing things. Depending on God can be something we say in prayer, but find hard to practice.

Adam and Eve found it hard to practice dependence on God to provide for their needs. They may have thought: "There is no reason not to eat what we want to eat." They wanted to be independent in their understanding of good and evil. Why obey God? Why can't we take care of ourselves?

It is hard for us humans to surrender and depend on God. As a pastoral minister in a poor urban parish, parishioners and I learned a lot about depending on God from the neighbors who lived near the Catholic church.

New housing was being built in the neighborhood around the church. The neighbors, not members of the parish, wanted to welcome new people when they moved into the area. They requested the use of church facilities for this purpose. The parish and neighbors agreed that a community meal would be a good way to welcome new people, and also a way to provide food for families struggling to feed themselves.

The church obtained a source of food for one evening meal each week. The neighbors agreed to provide the hands needed to prepare the food, set up the dining room, and clean up after the meal.

The temptation for parishioners, who were not from the neighborhood, was to prepare the food and serve the community meal. We wanted to do it our way rather than have people from the neighborhood use our kitchen and dining facilities to provide the meal and create their own atmosphere of welcome.

When the devil tempted Jesus, he asked Jesus to prove that he was the Son of God by jumping off the temple roof. Serving the neighbors, doing something for them, was a way to prove our goodness. We found it much harder to sit down and share a meal with our poorer neighbors, listen to their stories, and sometimes pray with them.

We also were tempted to protect the church property, rather than be generous and make possible hospitality. We wanted to make sure we did not lose anything from our kitchen. We questioned the wisdom of risking non-church members using church dining facilities. They might break something or not clean up afterwards. For sure, they would not take care of things

the way we did. The possibility existed that we would not have the facility for our own church functions if we let the neighbors use it. We had to overcome our need for control, our need to prove we were good, and our need to protect what was ours.

We had to learn that letting go, surrendering our church property into the hands of others, was the best way for us to be the presence of God in that neighborhood. We had to learn respect for our neighbors who are poor and come to a deeper understanding of what the option for the poor means.

When we listened to stories and sometimes prayed with them, we learned about trusting God, even when there was no one else to trust. They talked about not knowing where they would be staying for the night or where the next meal would come from, yet they were so thankful for what they had been given in the present. They taught us how to trust God who provides everything for the future.

With difficulty, we, who lived comfortable lives, found ourselves in relationships with people who were poor and had little of life's comforts. We became friends. We learned to love one another, not as an obligation to obey a command, but to be concerned and involved with each other. The church community learned to be a good neighbor to people who before had been strangers.

We learned what Francis, Bishop of Rome, wrote in the apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*: "Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries."

Our neighbors evangelized us, so we could be more effective missionaries.

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: Peace, social justice and integrity of creation

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