

Our parents and those who serve as parents in our growing up years feed and clothe us. We get from them a value system. Sometimes they sit us down and explain what is important. More often, we get their wisdom from watching them, hearing them talk about who they vote for; we overhear conversations. We watch them enjoy life and work and struggle. We get something from this. Most children know what their parents think. Most children get what they believe as they experience life with parents who live and work and go places together. We also learn from our friends. Sometimes slowly, sometimes not so slowly, we try out what others believe. It is why we may have heard parents say, "Be careful with the company you keep." We also learn something from those who educate us. Ever been sitting in an orientation session? The Dean of the College says to you, "*We are here, students, to teach you to think for yourselves, not to accept ideas just because someone says that you should. You have to make choices, determine your own values.*" Some have said this is the message of the culture. "*It's up to you. There's nothing you can count on, nothing you can trust, rely on, turn to, or are accountable before—except yourself.*" (35, Robinson) Life experience becomes a teacher, doesn't it? Conflict and hard knocks become our teacher. We have to work out what it means, but something stirs in us a longing for something better. Recently, I have wondered how we come to hold the values which shape us.

As we begin the season of Lent, we read again about Jesus in the wilderness. There is a value struggle going on. Luke says the Spirit leads him there and I would add for him to determine what kind of Messiah he is and will be. It seems as if it is a battle of the titans, a young Jesus fresh from the waters of baptism and a character Luke simply calls "the devil," engage. In reality, it is no contest at all. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy several times in fending off his opponent's challenges. What we are seeing is Jesus engaging a challenger over behavior and truths that are vital for him. We never have to face this kind of contest in the wilderness. Sometimes it may feel that life is a battle and we are trying to hold on to what really matters. Reading this story again has made me think of Martin Luther's great hymn of the Reformation, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." In verse 3, we sing:

*And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us: the prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure; for lo, his doom is sure; **one little word** shall fell him.*

This morning I would to consider this little word, not literally "one" word, but the brief, clear statements of Jesus. This is what Luther means. If Luther is correct, "one little word shall fell him." What we have here is an opportunity to watch the conflict and learn something from the battle. What we have here is God's truth scoring a triumph. Notice how this one little word does it. Notice the power of the one little word. What is it?

First of all, this word is not magical. It is not an incantation, not a word that performs miracles, not a word with power enacted because of its sounds. There are words that we use like incantations. "Knock on wood." Usually we are superstitious about certain things and we use words magically. Ever heard someone tell you, "Don't say something like that; it is likely to happen." We sometimes try to shape circumstances by our belief in the magic of words. We make words magical. We give them powers they do not really have. There is no power in knocking on wood. Saying something does not make it happen. There is power here in what Jesus says to the devil. The power these words exude does not come because they are like some incantation Harry Potter pulls out of his hat. The words Jesus uses from Deuteronomy are not magical.

His words here are also not “muscular” or manipulative. His words do not shove his opponent around. His “one little word” here does not give orders, does not bark out a command, does not force or push or make aggressive demands. “Shut your mouth. You will do what I tell you.” “Stop it.” “Shut up, right now.” “Get out.” “Put your hands over your head and lie down on the ground. You are under arrest.” “I have a gun; give me all your money.” “If you do this, I will never speak to you again.” These words we know. We use words like these. They are spoken with force, with a desire to manipulate, with a desire to control, to push around. With these words, we often apply increased volume in our voice. With these kinds of words, we usually screw up our faces and look and act like someone else. There is emotion and history and power behind such expressions. There is perhaps anger and frustration behind such words. What Jesus offers here does not have such. What Jesus offers the devil is not a word with muscle or the desire to manipulate.

Jesus’ words are descriptive. His words here in Luke in the Judean desert paint a picture. His words describe the kingdom of God. His words to the devil simply announce what is eternally real. It might be prescriptive for those who follow Christ, but for the devil these words mean nothing. No magic is applied on the devil. There is no incantation. Jesus does not say these words and suddenly he is gone. No push and shove. They describe Jesus’ life and way and limitation. They remind him what matters, what is important.

Notice with me how these words are descriptive of the life to which he is called. His one little word identifies a way of living, an overarching supposition, a basic thesis: **one does not live by bread alone**. Living, how we live, notice the word “live.” There is something more than what is physical. Well, how else does one live if not on bread? One lives on purpose. “If I have a why to live, I can deal with almost any how,” says Viktor Frankl quoting a German philosopher. Not just any purpose. These words speak about God’s purpose. One lives on not just knowing God’s purpose, but also knowing God. One lives on knowing who God is and what God wants. One lives on knowing God for ourselves. One lives on God’s thoughts and ideas. One lives on what God believes and what God desires for us and for the world. One lives on what God says to us, what God communicates to us, what God wishes for us. **One does not live by bread alone** describes a way of living.

What happens if no one knows the word of God? What happens if the Bible is the number one best seller that is seldom read? What happens if there is no sword of the Spirit? If no one knows the teachings of Deuteronomy? What difference does it make if you know very little about the Bible?

Can you imagine you have been given the role of Banquo in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*? You are out on stage and suddenly you realize you do not know your lines. You are standing in the middle of a great drama. There are people who are depending on you. There are people who are watching you. People have paid serious money to come see you. And you do not know your lines. Suddenly there is the desire to go back to your room, back to your study, back to the classroom and read those words again, learn those words again, memorize those words again. Sometimes life is like being lost in the middle of a great drama and we do not have our lines. OK, we know there is something more, but we do not know what.

Jesus’ one little word identifies a way of his relating to God, of acting out his friendship, of valuing his friendship. **“Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”** Jesus’ word is not magical or muscular. It identifies how the relationship works. God is the only One we worship.

There are other ways to relate to God: running from God, ignoring God, believing God. Some believe God gives us duties to perform, tasks. Not a relationship...just adding God to everything else; “we have all this and just add God.” Mao TseTung said, “Religion is the opiate of the people”... “keeps people calm” in a mill village... the religious are the hardest workers...so get the people into church and they can produce more, use God for American productivity, for success. Stephen Covey identifies one of his 7 Habits of Successful People, belief in a supreme being...God is all about our success, about living well. God is all about truth, justice and the American Way.

Have you ever had a flat tire and looked for the instruction booklet and it was no where to be seen? Ever tried to build a swing set without the instructions? I had a neighbor once who knew how to do everything. When we got the swingset from Sears for William and Anna, he said, “We don’t need those instructions. I can do this without them.” Living life without understanding how we relate to God is like living with the instructions.

Jesus’ one little word identifies a way of defining his world: “***Do not put the Lord your God to the test.***” God provides life with certain parameters, certain borders, certain expectations. Jesus does not expect the devil to pay attention to these words. They are for him. They provide Jesus a way to walk in, not the devil. He accepts this way. Jesus will not be the kind of man who expects supernatural rescues from God. He will be a member of the human race. He will not fly or levitate or expect any angel of the heavenly host to peel off and provide a safety net for silly demonstrations. He will honor the law of gravity and not choose to press God’s ability to keep him safe.

Knowing our limitations keeps us connected. Here are words that maintain a connection. Wonder if we never had any words to connect: no cellphones, no email, no cards or letters, no conversation. Here is a young couple who build a home with the highest ideas of marriage, yet as the years pass “while never denying the great principles on which they started, carelessly drop out the techniques of family life, the lovely, gracious methods and observances by which intimacy is made beautiful and romance is deepened into abiding friendship until, as with an old violin, the passing years add sweetness and mellowness to the tone! One often sees homes where the observances that made home life beautiful have been neglected until the ill consequence has gone so far that it is too late to mend. Nobody has committed adultery. Nobody has denied the principles of a great home. Only, dropping the means of grace, they have awakened to find that grace itself has gone.” (10, Fosdick)

So what? There is a time and place in our lives to recover this descriptive word. We need that kind of word so our own lives get fortified and defined and directed. Our Education division has changed its name to Christian Formation. We believe God’s Word forms and shapes us. Those who are applying themselves to serious study of the scriptures know the power of one little word. May God help us all in this Lenten season to reflect on what this means for us and pray God would guide us. May we learn with Martin Luther and with Jesus the power of one little word.

Fosdick, Harry Emerson, Successful Christian Living, Harper Brothers, New York, 1937.
Robinson, Anthony, Transforming Congregational Cultures, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Louisville, Kentucky, 2003, p.35.

