*Sermon 1st Sunday in Lent, 3-10-2019*

Deuteronomy 26, 1-11
Luke 4, 1-13

*May these spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living word, Jesus Christ our Lord!*

When you were planning on coming to Germany, to settle here and live here, you will certainly have asked yourself what kind of new place you will live in from now on and maybe you did some investigating, for sure in our newer time you’ve done some internet background checks….I did, not because I wanted to settle in Germany – no, I was born here, I had no choice ☺ - …I did it just for fun and personal information…and so I found out some very interesting news about the country we live in.

According to an internationally acclaimed website there is a list of twelve most sinful cities in the world – and the shocking moment comes now - we have in our country two of the most sinful cities in the world. The people from that website analyzed data from all the major cities worldwide and it turns up that we have two of them here in Germany, number 12 is Hamburg….and the next one is Berlin at number 6. I was pretty surprised to find this out. Well curious as I am, I took a look at the other cities and I realized that there are also two American cities on that list, New Orleans at place 11 and, surprise surprise, Las Vegas on number 4. Other cities like Amsterdam, Kingston, Moscow, Rio de Janeiro also appear on that list. The most sinful city in the world seems to be the city of Pattaya in Thailand. But there were no cities from Australia, Africa or the United Kingdom on the list, well, maybe that last point will change after the Brexit, you never know ☺ …anyway, it seems that the most sinful cities are well spread out around the globe.

Still thinking about our two German cities Hamburg and Berlin, I called a friend of mine in Hamburg and told him what I’ve found…and he wasn’t really happy about that, even more he was quite upset and will start his own investigations - another friend of mine who lives in Berlin, I called him as well, it seemed to me that he was actually kind of proud about that doubtful tribute to his home city, when I told him about that.

Since we know that we are surrounded by fake news it is sometimes very helpful not to believe everything that is written on the internet, I hesitated a bit with that information, but encouraged by my friends from Hamburg and Berlin I looked into the criteria they use and it was actual very interesting from a theological perspective. They came up with criteria such as the seven deadly sins, the seven capital sins and then they researched the received raw data from the cities. I’ll give you a few examples: To measure the presence of wrath in a city they looked at the violence rate for that city.

To measure the presence of pride and vainglory in a city they measured the number of tanning and beauty salons and plastic surgeons in that city, to measure the presence of lust in a city they counted the number of adult entertainment venues in those cities, to measure the level of greed in that city they looked at the giving rates for people who live there, and so on, and so on through each of the seven deadly sins and apparently our two German cities scored very high in several of those categories.

Since we live in a world with lots of sinful cities I thought it might be helpful to take a look at the temptations of Jesus we heard today and what those teach us in how we can overcome sin in our own life.
At the very beginning throughout each of the three temptations we have heard today the devil tries to get Jesus to doubt his true identity.
“If you are the son of God then you should turn the stone into bread”, “if you are the son of God you jump off the temple”, “if you worship me then you will become somebody”. The passage that was right before this is very interesting, we heard it a couple of weeks ago, it was the baptism of Jesus when his identity as the son of God was made absolutely clear. “The heavens were open, the spirit descended in visible form as a dove and a voice from heaven said - this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased”.

There couldn’t have been a more dramatic and clear way to make very clear, that Jesus was the son of God, that he was beloved by his father and that his father delighted in the relationship he had with his son. And yet today the devil tries to chip away at that, tries to break that identity apart and say “if you are the son of God, maybe you really are somebody, maybe you need to prove yourself so you know for sure who you really are.”

Those are the kind of temptations that actually I think most of us face at certain moments of our lives. Maybe you even thought of things like “if I was better looking, if I was slimmer,
if I could get that job promotion, if I had a better family, if I was more successful, then I would be somebody, then I would be worthy of respect and attention from others. Those are temptations by the devil to attack the core of our identity as beloved children of our heavenly father, our identity as God’s beloved children who God delights in, who God loves with unconditional love, to give stability and confidence to us in the midst of our daily journey of life.
At our baptism we were promised that God’s unconditional love will accompany us through our whole life. No matter what we would do, we don’t have to earn it, we don’t have to prove it, we don’t have to do something else to become somebody who can be loved – we are loved by our heavenly father and there is no “If’s” about it. God loves us unconditionally!!!

So the question for us this Lenten season is whether we are now willing to accept this free gift of God’s love or not? Are we willing to take time to welcome this love into our hearts during this Lenten season? It’s often a time, I think, when we can be very vulnerable to temptation, because we can forget how much we are loved.
Thinking about the seven deadly sins that are apparently present and wide spread across the globe. How often do we give in temptations of vanity for example because we feel like we need to do something to receive love and attention - we are good enough the way we are! Often, we do give in the temptations of lust because they promise us attention, excitement and pleasure that we feel like we need to be somebody.

Again, how often do we give in temptations of greed because we believe that until we have more of whatever, we really won’t be respected by our peers or our neighbors. How often do we give in to temptations of sloth and laziness because we lack the confidence to be decisive and to embrace our mission with purpose and with enthusiasm. When we take time to embrace the free gift of God’s love we will overcome any temptations we may experience in our lives.

The first reading we heard today gives some great advice on how we can stay strong in our identity as God’s beloved children. Moses told the people to put together a basket of the first fruits of the harvest and take it to the priest. Before I explain anymore, I have to make it clear that I’m NOT saying make a basket of food and bring it to Chris or Douglas, our priests ☺!

The spiritual attitude is what’s important for us to learn from. You see, making a sacrifice to God of the fruits of the harvest was very typical for all religions of that time, but most religions would use that sacrifice to win God’s favor, to prove that they are worthy of God’s care and attention, to try to get on God’s good side. Moses says it should be an offering of gratitude for the love they‘ve already received. They don’t have to do anything to earn God’s favor, they already have it. They don’t have to do anything to get God’s attention, God already cares for them, unconditionally. And so they only need to give thanks for the way God has blessed them in the past, how God is present to them in the future so they can move forward with confidence knowing that God’s unconditional love will always be there – for them!
None of us brought baskets here to church today but we can make a list in our hearts, a list of gratitude for all the ways God has blessed us in the past, the way God is blessing us - here today - so we will be reassured that we really are God’s beloved sons and daughters and that God delights in each one of us – just the way we are – here, today! Today at the service, in a couple of moments, we receive Christ’s love in the Eucharist – the greatest blessing we can receive – the body and blood of our Savior – a perpetual reminder that God will always be with us, now, today and always – and even when we are living in a world where we are surrounded by sin cities!

Amen.

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