

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 21, 2010

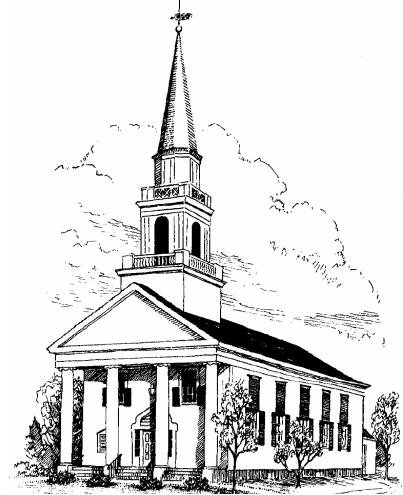
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Trash Talk ”

Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13



This past Wednesday morning, I caught a recap on NBC of the first of the men’s figure skating events in the Olympics—they call it the “short program”— and I learned about the incredible performance of Russian skater Yevgeny Plushenko and his coming out of a brief retirement to go for the gold one more time. He skated impeccably and earned the highest score in the event. His performance was soon followed, however, by another near-perfect performance by USA skater Evan Lysacek, resulting in very, very tight scores between them and the other top skaters going into the free skate event later in the week. At the conclusion of the story, the commentator added that Russian skater Plushenko had already begun a little “trash-talk” to unnerve his opponents, stating that no one else in the top tier includes a quadruple jump in their routines the way he does.

That phrase “trash-talk” refers to boasting or insults, sometimes in a humorous vein, commonly heard in competitive situations, many times sporting events, and it’s used to intimidate the opposition. The trash-talker I remember most, an Olympic gold medal winner himself, was Muhammad Ali, 3-time World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, who, at the height of his career in the 1960s, for days before the upcoming match, at weigh-ins and press conferences and interviews, would look straight in to the cameras and begin to taunt his opponent—“I am the greatest, Joe Frazier ... I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.” [Now if you don’t remember that, it’s worth a visit to *YouTube* to try to see it again.]

Trash-talk. This morning in our scripture we meet the original trash-talker—the devil himself. And make no mistake, we are looking at a full-blown competition here in this wilderness. Jesus has been in training for 40 days preparing for his ministry. Satan not only has been watching, but knows who this is, his all-time competitor, whom he may just be able to finally pin down now at his weakest point.

So we have the first event: The stone-to-bread conversion. Jesus wins easily. Second event: The bow-down-and-it’s-all-yours offer. Jesus scores higher. Third event: The dare-you downhill. And Jesus emerges victorious from all three, knocking the devil right off the course.

But, it’s important to note that the competition is not over after these three events. Despite Jesus’ metaphoric gold medal in the wilderness, we read: “When the devil had finished

every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time.*” And before this Lenten season is over, we will encounter Satan again here in Luke’s gospel: In Chapter 22: “Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve”. And we know it was Judas who later betrayed Jesus to the authorities.

The devil departed from him until an opportune time. Unlike older Olympians who retire from competition, this contender for power still never seems to give up and go away. It doesn’t really matter how you view the nature of evil in the world, whether it’s a force out there or in here, or a combination of both or neither, it still seems to pop up in our moments of self-doubt, apathy, defensiveness, fear, fatigue, or sometimes seemingly out of nowhere. And the goading and the taunting, the trash-talk begins, and if we’re not careful, we buy into it and internalize the messages and we’re knocked right off track.

I’m not smart enough. I’m not good enough. I don’t measure up. Or name a body part and it’s either too short or too small or too wide or lacking some characteristic which keeps us from walking through life with confidence in who we really are. The USA men’s figure skater Lysacek revealed in his interview that his challenge was to keep out of his thoughts the continuous replay of his missteps four years before which had cost him in the winter Olympics in Torino.

Trash-talk. It’s meant to throw you off. Its purpose is to make you fail. But many times we don’t even recognize it. It may not be as obvious as Muhammad Ali’s pre-match chants. The choices are usually not as obvious as the ones in our passage this morning. Easy to see the good and evil there: bow down to the devil or follow Jesus. No question. But today we get lots of confusing messages. Today we’ve got advertisers telling us we *deserve* to buy things and go places, that we can have it all and *should* have it all, so much so that those small obscure voices out there attempting to pull our attention to injustices and inhumane practices and the truth behind our thoughtless consumption of things as basic as food and water are drowned out by ... trash-talk.

Thankfully, Jesus’ rebuttals in the wilderness are still useful for us today. His first: “One does not live by bread alone.” This is the time during our liturgical year when we are invited to take a good look, to examine the way we live. Is it by bread alone? Do the tangible, material, self-gratifying aspects of our lives dominate? Or have we truly embraced that we cannot live by them alone and need also to include times of solitude and fellowship and appreciation for and participation in God’s creation and its gifts of nature and companionship and love?

Jesus’ second rebuttal: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Now, certainly, I think we can all feel pretty comfortable that if the devil came along to any one of us and offered us all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshiping him, we would easily turn him down. Obvious bad choice. There have been enough books and songs written and movies made showing us what happens to people who sell their souls to the devil that we know better, right? Oh, if it were that easy all the time. The daily choices which come our way today need to be a matter of deliberate discernment, a peering in to our individual consciences to determine if our habits, our work, our spending, our investing, our relationships truly serve only God. It’s not easy to see those clearly, but it’s necessary to try.

Finally, after the devil's suggestion to Jesus to throw himself off the top of the temple to be caught by angels, Jesus shuts Satan right down with "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." And there's really no reason why we can't respond to both internal and external trash-talk in the same way. We are God's beloved children and, as such, we can muster the same divine source to look temptation in the eye and answer: "How dare you?"

Jesus was famished in that wilderness, had not eaten in 40 days. In many ways, we are famished, too. Working too hard, running on empty, dealing with medical problems, worrying about finances, trying to raise children in a questionable culture, sandwiched between parents who need our care and children who do, too, trying to keep up with too much information delivered in too fast technologies with not nearly enough time. We, too, have our moments of exhaustion.

Jesus was famished, but the very first verse of our passage this morning tells us that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit." Full of the Holy Spirit. He entered the wilderness immediately following his baptism in the river Jordan. So he was full of the Holy Spirit. We are, too, by virtue of our baptisms. We are full of the Holy Spirit. We have deep, deep waters within us, reservoirs of grace given to us by God, from which we can draw when we are famished, when we are exhausted, when the choices are muddled, when the decisions are complex, when temptation looms in front of us talking trash.

Sisters and brothers, we live in a gray world. The easy black and white decisions are few in our complex, cloudy culture. And we are subject to false external messages as well as damaging internal ones. Yet, within each of us lies the clear, pure waters of Baptism, a well full of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had when he encountered that trash-talking devil. May we remember that, not only during this season of Lent, but beyond, to see through the trash-talk of temptation right to the truth. Amen.

