

Part of our role as Christians is to preach the Truths of Jesus Christ in season and out of season. As a preacher, there are a number of truths that are not so easily preached on because they require sacrifice and are controversial. As part of my Lenten practices, I feel called to preach on some of these very issues. For if I am to call myself a Christian then I must truly believe that only in Jesus Christ will we find the way, the truth, and the life, and that this Truth will set us free.

And with that, I turn to the First Reading. The Genesis Account. Things were fine with our first parents, until, the serpent, Satan, entered in and convinced our parents that God was somehow hiding something from them.

Look at how ridiculous the first sin is. What does the serpent offer?: “you will be like gods.” Hello! Adam and Eve, you were just created in the image and likeness of God – you are like God – you are fully in LOVE, this *is* to be like God! He’s claiming to sell you something you already have, something he cannot deliver. Which is true of all sin, it promises us something that we can only have by following God’s way, it gives us shadows and illusions in place of Truth.

Several decades ago, we were promised something that would reduce abortions, elevate the dignity of women, and strengthen our marriages. We could have said with Eve, well that is “good, pleasing, and desirable” as she correctly stated how the apple appeared. But the Church to the surprise of many said “No” to the promise. Pope Paul VI warned that it was an illusion and that it would bring many evils into our world. In fact this teaching was nothing new, just as *contraception* is nothing new. It had been around before the time of Christ, the early Church warned against it, and it wasn’t until 1930 that *any* Christian denomination even ever allowed the idea. Paul VI was laughed at by many, rejected by even many of his priests and theologians. But to read his document *Humanae Vitae* today, can be a very chilling reading. For what he predicted came to pass.

The apple was held out with all of its promise, and it was plucked up despite the Church’s pleas. And the result: Well, the first promise was that abortion rates would go down since people wouldn’t be put into the situation of having to abort, since they would be contracepting if they couldn’t handle kids. What really happened: Abortion skyrocketed in all nations that have legalized contraception. And I mean skyrocketed, because now sex and procreation have had their inherent tie severed. So when somebody becomes pregnant, they say oops, how did that happen, this wasn’t my intention? I need to get rid of that.

The next promise: Women’s liberation. So why if the liberation of women was promised, has domestic abuse against women and children increased 14-fold? Why does the supermarket magazine aisle look like the objectification of women gone wild, with nearly every magazine whether for men or for women competing to have the least-dressed woman on the cover? Why do many college men keep count on how many different women they can sleep with? Now women can be used for pleasure without the man needing to worry about responsibility. Is this the new high level of dignity and liberation? Am I missing something?

Another promise: Contraceptives were supposed to strengthen families by easing their fear of having too many children. Sounds good. In actuality families have become weakened. Adultery has risen as the gift of sexuality has become more about pleasing the self and less and less about making a gift of oneself to the spouse. Commitment is no longer part of the package. The statistics bear a hard truth: 55% of marriages now end in

divorce. Stop! Right there Father, there are other factors. Maybe? But isn't it interesting that of the couples who don't use contraception but practice the Church-approved Natural Family Planning, less than 2% divorce. Less than 2%! I look at my vocation, and I think if somebody told me that 55% of priests leave the priesthood, but if I change one thing in my life, I can improve the chances dramatically, to the tune of less than 2%, hello, sign me up for a course today! Even if I had no conception of ever leaving the priesthood, I would recognize that whatever they are doing it must be something that builds and strengthens the vocation.

Returning to the Genesis account. Note that immediately after the first sin, they realize that they were naked and so cover up. Why is this? Before they sinned, they saw in their nakedness that they were made for each other, that they went together. They looked upon each other as a great gift, and desired to make a gift of themselves to each other. They had no problem with their nakedness.

What happens after the sin? God's love has been rejected. Their ability to love is greatly damaged. Now Adam looks upon Eve and does not think of making a gift of himself, but of using her for his pleasure, and she has the same feelings toward him, twisted, fallen feelings. And in recognizing these feelings and knowing that their dignity is too great to be looked upon as an object, they quickly cover themselves up.

What happens to society after the pill? God's plan inseparably uniting the marital act and the ability to co-create is rejected. Our ability to love is greatly damaged. The reality that was meant to allow us to share in God's creating love, is now by chemical or physical means, suppressed. Pleasure without responsibility. Self without selflessness. New human life is seen as an intrusion, something to be actively worked against. God's wonderful gift of fertility is now viewed as a threat, something not to be worked with, but *against*.

Which brings us to the question: if fertility is a gift and not something to be suppressed, what am I supposed to do, have a dozen kids? Good question. That's a question for you to work out with God. Nobody can say how many kids any couple should or should not have. Couples are to pray about this and cooperate with God's plan, regulating births if there is a serious enough reason not to be having children at this time – for example because of financial or psychological reasons.

But regulating births does not mean attacking the gift of fertility. Unlike animals we don't "pro-create" simply as a biological drive. A married man and woman come together by a conscious decision to make a gift of themselves to each other, and sometimes God blesses this gift with the gift of new life, a baby. If a couple want to express their love for each other maritally then they are free to do so at any time. If they believe that now is not a good time to be having children, then they should avoid those times that they know themselves to be fertile. During that time, they can express love in many other ways, improving their communication, and their sensitivity to each other. They can know these fertile and infertile times through Natural Family Planning, which is NOT the rhythm method, but is a scientific method, so far as the one being taught here beginning next Saturday, that is 98% effective, which is equal or more effective than contraceptives. 98%

Satan is always lurking around the corner, offering an easier route but an untruthful route. Our Lord, experienced the same thing in today's Gospel: "here Jesus, turn this into bread, then you can feed everyone and they will follow you and you will

never have to go the Cross. Here Jesus, jump off this Temple, the angels will catch you and people will be captivated by your powers and you'll never have to go to the Cross. Here Jesus, pay me homage, and I will turn back over to you all of the people I've enslaved, and you will never have to go to the Cross for them." Jesus was truly tempted. Three other paths were laid before him, three paths by which he could avoid self-sacrifice. Yet he chose to reject all three in order to do the Father's will, because he knew the Father to be Love and thus never had to fear Him even when he was asked to make such a sacrifice.

Satan, despises sacrificial love, because it is the hallmark of Christ and of the Christian life. Does Natural Family Planning require sacrifice? Yes. Is it easier to take a pill? Yes or at least yes in the short-term. But one is the way of self-giving, self-sacrificing, and ultimately fulfilling love, the other is the way of an illusion. An illusion that a generation after the pill is showing its horrible frightfulness. Where sin has abounded, grace abounds all the more. Let us ask Jesus in this Mass, for the grace necessary to live to the full, the life of self-sacrificial love. And if you would like to learn more about practicing Natural Family Planning, we will be having a couple from the Couple-to-Couple League teaching a four-part class beginning this coming Saturday. See the bulletin for details as well as for a web link to more information. Also, my email is in the bulletin today, it's listed under the ad for the Teen Bible Study. Feel free to email or call if you have any questions or want more explanations. Because I know it is one of the "hard sayings" of our Faith, but it is in the Truth, that we are set free.