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To Whom Do You Beautifully Belong?

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
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“To whom do you beautifully belong?”

This question comes from a play by Henry James called “The High Bid.”¹ It’s from a scene where a man is talking to a butler in a country house. At one point in the conversation the man asks, “What are *you*, my dear man?” a question trying to get at the butler’s identity. At first the butler doesn’t catch the drift, so the man asks again, “I mean, to whom do you beautifully *belong*?” In this passage, I think Henry James is suggesting that the question of identity is tied to the question of belonging: “what are you”; “to whom do you beautifully belong?”

I love that question.

Now, with Henry James, we need to be aware of his irony. James was fond of having his characters call each other “beautiful” and “marvelous,” when in actuality they were becoming more and more ugly in their behavior. What might to outward appearances seem beautiful was, in a moral sense, quite ugly. A less subtle example of this irony is found the language of my native state of New Jersey. When I would royally mess up and do something really stupid, my friends would say things like “That was just beautiful, Joe. Truly brilliant!” Now, it should be pretty clear that they didn’t really think I was acting beautifully and brilliantly. Quite the opposite. Not exactly Henry James, but you get the point.

James’ idea that the things that we belong to, the things we give our allegiance to, can subtly shape our characters, for good or for ill, is put to good use in Alan Hollinghurst’s novel, *The Line of Beauty*.² It’s about a young man, Nick Guest, who gets caught up in the seemingly beautiful and grand world of some upper-middle class Brits in the 1980s, who turn ought to be quite ugly in a moral sense. Nick comes from more humble circumstances and he is attracted to a college friend’s family because of their money, power, and success. But behind the grand parties and fabulous holidays, we soon see an underlying hypocrisy and ruthlessness that eventually turns on Nick himself. Nick desperately wants to belong to this powerful and attractive set, but what happens is that in the process of being welcomed into the family he himself becomes hypocritical and ruthless and quite ugly.

To whom do you beautifully belong?

Is this an ironic question?

Are the people or things or values that you put your trust in and pledge your loyalty to

¹ See *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel (New York: OUP, 1990)

² Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004)

making you truly beautiful or actually quite the opposite?

How are our characters being shaped for good or for ill by the people and values and things we end up worshipping?

I raise these questions because this morning we have two classic biblical passages about worship and temptation. In our Old Testament lesson, Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit, and in our Gospel lesson Jesus is lead into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. Now, there is an enormous amount of literature on the meaning and nature of the temptations in the garden and in the wilderness. You have probably heard hundreds of sermons on these passages, all of which have probably uncovered some important things. But this morning, I want to focus on just one aspect of these stories. I want to explore the questions of identity and belonging that they raise. In a certain sense, of both temptation stories, of Adam and Eve in the garden, and of Jesus in the wilderness, we could ask the question: to whom do you beautifully belong? And with Adam and Eve we see one type of response and with Jesus we see another.

With Adam and Eve, we all know the story. God created Adam and Eve, put them in the Garden to till it and care for it, they can eat of every tree of the garden, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Along comes the serpent and he starts asking some crafty questions: “Did God really say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?” “Well, no, not from any tree, only the one in the middle of the garden, if we eat of that one, or even so much as touch it we will die.” And so on and so forth, until they finally eat the fruit.

But what’s the temptation really about? Is it really about eating a piece of forbidden fruit? Or is it about something else? There are lots of answers to these question, but notice what the serpent says, “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be open and *you will be like God*, knowing good and evil.” Did you catch it? Did you hear the real temptation? “You will be like God.” That does sound pretty good. Adam and Eve are creatures. They belong to God. As creatures they are given everything they need; a good world to live in and to work in. And yet, the serpent in his crafty way raises the question: “to whom do you belong?” *Well, God I suppose.* “But if you eat from the tree, then you will be like God. You won’t belong to God anymore. You will be the sovereign lords of your own lives, knowing good and evil, belonging to no one but your own selves.” Sounds pretty good. *Freedom. Power. Knowledge.* It’s tempting right. To be our own gods. To be lords of the world. To be like God. And they eat ...

But do they become like God?

No. They become ashamed. They become aware of their nakedness. They fall from grace. When they belonged to God and lived as good creatures of their good Creator, everything was good. Indeed, it was very good. When they sought to “beautifully” belong to their own selves, rather than become like God, they fell into shame, they distorted the image of God in themselves, and what they knew was not good and evil, but rather their own shame.

As my friends in New Jersey might say, “That was really brilliant, guys. Just beautiful!”

To whom do you beautifully belong?

Is who or what you are giving your ultimate loyalty to, your ultimate allegiance enabling you to become truly beautiful and good, or is it causing you to become quite ugly in a moral sense?

In the story of Adam and Eve we see creatures denying their dependence on God, their status as creatures, and ending up enslaved to their selves and their selfish desires. But in the story of the temptation of Jesus, we see a different response. Again there has been an enormous amount written on the three temptations Jesus’ faces in the wilderness. But, again I want to

focus on just one aspect of them. It seems to me all of temptations are about Jesus' identity, about who he really belongs to. Notice how the first two temptations are phrased: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple." Satan is tempting Jesus by questioning his identity as the Son of God. *If you are the Son of God.* The real kicker comes in the last temptation, "Bow down and worship me and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." Each temptation is, in its own way, about who Jesus is, who he belongs to, and how he will or will not remain faithful to that identity. And unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus remains true to who he really is. He will not turn stones to bread, not because bread is a bad thing, but because we don't live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. He will not jump off the temple in the arms of angels because he will not put God to the test. And he will not bow down and worship Satan because he knows we are to worship God and serve him alone.

So for Jesus all the temptations are about his identity.

What are you, my dear man?

The Son of God

And, then, as the Son of God, to whom do you beautifully belong?

The Lord our God and to him alone. Not to material power. Not political power. Not to worldly success. Rather, to God and God's purposes and God's kingdom.

So in the story of Adam and Eve and in the story of Jesus in the wilderness we get contrasting responses to the problem of worship and temptation, the question of to whom do we belong. Adam and Eve deny their identity as creatures of God and fall into shame. Jesus remains true to his identity as the Son of God and angels wait on him. Both stories raise the old question of Who or what we are going to worship? Who or what is it that we really trust? Who or what is it that we truly believe in? To whom or to what do we truly belong? Is it God or something less than God? And the answers to these questions are going to tell us a lot about our character, beautiful and good, or otherwise. As N T Wright puts it "You become like what you worship. When you gaze in awe, admiration, and wonder at something or someone, you begin to take on the character of the object of your worship. Those who worship money become, eventually, human calculating machines. Those who worship [pleasure] become obsessed with their own attractiveness or prowess. Those who worship power become more and more ruthless."³ In the stories of temptation we hear basic questions about our identity and about whom we belong to. Will we belong to money or power or success? As beautiful and as attractive as things like this may seem, if we end up belonging to them we may become very ugly indeed. To whom do you beautifully belong?

Adam and Eve gave into the temptation, but Jesus did not. And because he did not, that is good news for all of us. He did not give into the temptation to be a mere earthly ruler who wielded only earthly power. Rather he remained true to who he was as the Son of God and to whom he truly belonged. And he stayed true to a ministry which did involve becoming the Lord of all the kingdoms of the world, but not by falling down and worshipping a false god, but by being nailed upon the cross. And, as Tom Long points out, the church faces a similar temptation when it tries to find some quicker and easier road to travel than the way of the cross: "Whenever the 'power of positive thinking' gets substituted for the power of sacrificial love and costly grace, then the tempter smiles. Whenever we bow down to that which is not God – to nation, or race, or family, or social standing - hoping that this will fill our hearts, we succumb to temptation ... The good news of this episode is that Jesus does not waver from his calling, does not step off

³ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: Harpers, 2006), p. 148.

the way of suffering lured by the illusion of a shortcut, does not bypass the cross.” And in doing this, he shows us the One who alone deserves our complete and total worship, and the way we must travel if we are to become truly beautiful.

Who or what is it that we worship?

Or as Henry James might put it: “To whom do you beautifully belong?”