

If your body aches and the dis-ease persists, becomes painful enough, you relent and call the doctor for an appointment. You describe your symptoms, the doctor asks clarifying questions, perhaps orders some tests, makes a diagnosis, prescribes medication and sends you on your way.

If you are emotionally distraught long enough and your family and friends are tired of listening to you lament, they may persuade you to see a mental health professional. Over time the counselor will make a diagnosis, prescribe some behavioral changes, perhaps some medication and make arrangements for follow up.

If your soul suffers, what do you do? Lent is the time in the church year when we focus on the dis-ease of our souls. Sin is the general diagnosis for what ails the soul. Confession in a high church tradition or a trip to the altar in a low church tradition is the prescribed cure. This understanding and practice of soul cure is rooted in the Reformation's reading of Paul, in Pietism and in American evangelical theology.

What I want to do this morning is look at Luke's understanding of soul sickness. The story of Jesus' temptation by the Slanderer gives us a read of the human condition quite a bit more complex and, in my opinion, far more interesting than the one we inherited from the Reformation.

The temptation to turn stones into bread exposes our addiction to stuff, to trying to fill a God-shaped hole with material things, trying to *secure* our "being" by compulsive "doing." If we think we can live by bread alone, if we believe every hunger can be sated by the endless pursuit of possessions, we become victims of a "metallic materialism" (Christian Wiman) which always comes with a side of inconsolable despair.

This addiction to stuff is fueled by assumptions of scarcity, by anxiety, and is the engine of an economy of greed and injustice. Charles Dickens moved from the debtor's prison to the center of Victorian life as the most sought-out man of his age. He had the big house, servants, important visitors, high-fee lecture tours, five-figure contracts—all of which never brought him security.

Nor did they obscure for him the under pinnings of Victorian affluence: the array of homeless children without nutrition or education, sweatshops, and crime rising out of pressures of the vilest poverty. Dickens romanticized the virtues of the poor, but he didn't sentimentalize the circumstances of their poverty. Dickens knew we live by bread; he also knew we do not live by bread alone.

The temptation to “throw ourselves from the pinnacle of the Temple,” exposes our addiction to external approval or affirmation. This addiction puts on “masks” to appear acceptable to God and to others. This addiction is fueled by shame and self-rejection. When our need for approval becomes greater than our need for happiness, our capacity for happiness is destroyed.

A large number of our most intense experiences as children and adults are related to events and people who have threatened or enhanced our sense of self-worth. The plea for recognition and affirmation is heard from the cradle to the tombstone, and beyond in how we will be remembered.

We do not have any choice about performing in this drama, but we are shaped by our participation, and the way we perform determines a great deal of our life. We are constantly trying to ‘place’ ourselves in the play, to interpret our past and present role and to imagine future possibilities.

Almost all of our time, according to Ernest Becker, is devoted to the protection, maintenance and aggrandizement of our self-esteem. Almost all of our inner life, when we are not absorbed in some active task, is a traffic in images of self-worth.

Henri Nouwen was plagued with a constant need for affection and esteem that crippled his capacity for happiness. His spiritual director told him the media reinforced the idea that human affection (being loved, liked, appreciated, praised, and recognized) is the most desired prize in life. Fame, celebrity—the ultimate commodity in our culture—no more sates the soul’s hunger than bread alone.

The temptation to become emperor of the world at the expense of allegiance to God exposes the ultimate aphrodisiac: unilateral power. We find control and coercion more compelling than mutuality, trust, collaboration, persuasion, and genuine relationship.

Flannery O’Connor saw control and power rather than truth and compassion as holding sway over our culture. Thus the path of allegiance to the ways of God in the world seem foolish, stupid, and dangerous. Yet, the Lenten discipline of renunciation, of self-denial, is the way out of the trap of violence and narcissism in which we live and destroy one another.

“Power in itself,” writes Karl Barth, “power for power’s sake *is* the Devil.” Or, as the poet (May Sarton) put it, “Given absolute power we all become sadists.” Those who renounce God immediately become victims of the nearest brute that is a little more powerful than they. There is nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of power.

As the world looks on in horror as Russia's invasion of Ukraine unfolds, one group has been praising Russian President Vladimir Putin. It turns out Putin has a fan base in America's right-leaning evangelical politicians and pundits.

At this year's Conservative Political Action Conference, which wrapped up over last weekend, Lauren Witzke, a GOP candidate for the Senate in Delaware, said: "Here's the deal. Russia is a Christian nationalist nation. They're actually Russian Orthodox . . . I identify more with Putin's Christian values than I do with Joe Biden."

Pray tell, when did initiating a war of choice become a christian value? When did targeting civilians with cruise missiles, cluster and vacuum bombs become a christian value? When did agreeing to a humanitarian corridor only to fire on fleeing women and children become a christian value?

In what reality is a self-confessed soulless man who murders his opponents and threatens the world with nuclear weapons more Christian than a lifelong, faithful Roman Catholic?

What Luke asks us to do if our souls are suffering is renounce our addictions: our addiction to stuff and more stuff, our addiction to affirmation and approval, our addiction to coercion and control. Why? Because these addictions, as surely as addiction to opioids or alcohol or sex, enslave us. Renunciation of these temptations, as Jesus demonstrated, is the path to freedom.