

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one in whom we live, and have our identity, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, amen.

Equifax, one of the three major credit reporting agencies in the U.S., recently announced a data breach that affects 143 million consumers. The hackers accessed Social Security numbers, birthdates, addresses, and driver's license numbers and other credit information. In 2017, there were 16.7 million victims of identity fraud, a record high that followed a previous record the year before. Criminals are engaging in complex identity fraud schemes and leaving record numbers of victims in their wake. The amount stolen hit \$16.8 billion last year alone. Thirty percent of U.S. consumers were notified of exposure to a data breach in 2017. With the introduction of the credit cards with the computer chip it's harder for the criminals to get your information so they've switched tactics. Now they're using your information to open new accounts in order to steal from you. So, instead of charging things to the credit card you already have where you can monitor the transactions, you won't even know they've opened this new account until and unless you see it on your credit report... You guessed it, from Equifax...

Identity theft is a huge problem in our modern world, but I propose to you it's been a problem since the fall of humans into sin back in the Garden of Eden when the serpent stole Adam and Eve's innocence. The devil was certainly doing his best to steal Jesus' identity during those 40 days in the wilderness in today's

Gospel. I've always thought the devil was tempting Jesus with just bread, then power and riches, and finally safety from getting hurt, even if he threw himself from the highest point in Jerusalem. Then I re-read the devil's actual words, "If you are the Son of God..."

It's true in today's reading the devil tries to seduce Jesus with the promise of bread when he's hungry, the glory and power of all the world's leaders, and the promise of rescue paired with the suggestion that God isn't sufficient to keep Jesus safe. In all this Jesus merely has worship Satan. So, in this scene, it's bread, power, and safety, but it could be something, anything else. The point isn't the specific temptations, but rather the underlying nature of temptation itself. In short, I would argue, temptation isn't so often temptation *toward* something, like being tempted to eat more ice cream than any human should consume at one setting or buying that new car, just because it has 390 horse power, or that new outfit just because I'm feeling lonely or depressed right now. Those are more like the signs or symptoms of sin and temptation. The underlying or root of temptation is when the devil attempts to move us away from something – namely, our relationship with God and the identity we receive in and through that relationship.

Too often Christians focus on all the things we shouldn't do, instead trusting in the gift and grace of our identity as children of God. The devil knows too well how to distract us. Notice how each of the temptations of Jesus seeks to erode and

undercut His confidence in this relationship with God and therefore undermine Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Jesus, of course, picks up on this. Which is why when the devil offers him bread, he responds with an affirmation of trust in God. The next temptation is more transparent, offering Jesus the power of the world's leaders in return for Jesus' allegiance and worship. Jesus again knows his allegiance can only be given to the one from whom he has received his identity. Finally, the devil proposes that God is not trustworthy, and goads Jesus into testing that relationship. "Let's just see, Jesus, if your Father will rescue you as He has promised..." Says the devil, but Jesus refuses.

In each case, the devil seeks to undermine Jesus' confidence in both God and himself. He seeks to erode Jesus' confidence that he is enough, that he is secure, that he is worthy of God's love. In the face of these temptations, Jesus quotes the sacred story of Israel in order to assert he is a part of that story and therefore reaffirm his identity as a child of God. Rooted in the Scriptures, Jesus is reminded not only he has enough, but he is of infinite worth in the eyes of God.

Bread, power, and safety were the devil's bling-bling, but it just as well might have been youth, beauty, and wealth, or confidence, fame, and security, or whatever the devil can use to catch your eye. On one level, we experience specific temptations very openly, but deep down they're all the same. All temptations seek to shift our allegiance, our trust, and our confidence away from God and toward

some substitute promising a more secure identity. Which is why I think this passage is really about identity theft and not simply the devil's failed attempt to steal Jesus' identity, but all the attempts to rob us of ours.

Consider the media barrage of advertising to which most of us are so regularly subjected. Nine times out of ten times the goal of such ads is to create in us a sense of something lacking or that we're somehow inadequate. Then the advertisers follow up with the promise that purchasing their advertised product will relieve our insecurity, which they created in the first place... Consider how many of the messages from the candidates running for any political office seek to create insecurity and fear in us. Terrorism, illegal immigrants, mega corporations, joblessness, low wages, high taxes, the wealthy, the poor... The list of enemy targets goes on and on. Depending on which candidate you listen to the target shifts, but the message is the same: you should be afraid because you do have enough and are not good enough... Elect me and I'll keep you safe...

We are under assault every single day by tempting messages that seek to draw our allegiance away from the God who created and redeemed us. The devil still calls and persuades us to follow toward some meager substitute. In the midst of it all, never forget God loves you more than anything. God loves you – and everyone in this world enough to send His only Son to take on our lot and life, to suffer the same temptations and wants, to be rejected as we often feel rejected, and

to die as we will die. Why? Why would God do all this? So we might know God is with us and for us, forever. God even raised Jesus from the dead to prove His love is more powerful than all the hate in the world and the life God offers us is more powerful than your sin, or the devil's empty promises and even death itself.

All this love and life has been poured out for you on the day you were Baptized. For those who came to worship last Wednesday we received ashes on our foreheads. I tried to make the sign of the Cross on each person who came forward. The purpose of that cross of ashes was to remember our mortality. Today, I'd like each of you to turn to someone close to you and make the sign of the cross on each other's foreheads, saying, "Remember your baptism, for you are God's beloved child." If you're too shy to do that to the person sitting next to you, then simply trace the cross on your own forehead and say to yourself, "I am God's beloved child."

As I thought about asking you to do this for each other the thought occurred to me that I begin each worship service by making the sign of the cross and I notice that many of you also cross yourselves at that time as well. It's a great way to remember our identity and fend off any temptation by the devil and his minions from trying to steal that identity away from you. We're all tempted in so many ways every single day lose our faith in God and confidence in His promises. We come to church to be reminded of, or given again, our identity as beloved children

of God. In the face of so many assaults on our identity, we come to church to have that identity renewed and restored so we can live in the confidence of God's abundant life and share with those around us God's unending love.

Lent is often focused on self-denial, sacrifice, and resisting temptation. All well and good, but can we also imagine Lent could be an ideal time to remind each other of the love and grace of God poured out for us in the cross. This year as we enter Lent may we keep our eyes fastened to the cross because in the cross we see most visibly God's love for us and all the world made perfectly clear.

God loves us and will keep loving us no matter what, and for this reason we are enough. I know I need to hear this declared again and again. In the face of all the messages to the contrary, that one promise can seem so difficult to believe. I am enough. You are enough. You don't have to add anything to yourself. God loves you exactly as you are. When the devil comes to you in the wilderness of your life, may you find your identity firmly established and unshakable in Jesus Christ. May you know, despite the devils protests to the contrary, you are a beloved child of God and you are holy and precious in God's sight. Amen.