

I want to preface this with the disclaimer that *not all* Midwestern towns were like the town in Footloose. I mean I'm sure some were, but mine definitely was not, just sayin' we were all about the dancing and the good music. Anyway, so I really want to assume that most of you have seen Footloose, early 80's Kevin Bacon moving to the small, uber religious town and messing up their humdrum, quiet lives with his infernal rock 'n roll music and his need to dance! His main antagonist in the movie is the father, the *pastor* father of the girl he has a thing for, a girl who is smack dab in the middle of her pastor's kid rebellious phase, experimenting with basically every vice her dad is against.

As her dad, played by John Lithgow at peak performance, gets more and more frustrated with how things in his town, things in his congregation, things in his own house are shifting, his sermons get more and more fiery, like he cannot handle the amount of angst that is building up in his chest and so he just lets it all out from the pulpit. It's like the one thing he can control and so he just gets into it all fire and brimstone about the pervasive *sin* that is infecting their town. At one point, he goes on a bit of a rant about how all of this must be the Lord testing them, their morals, their focus, their faith. "And he is testing us! Every, every day, our Lord is testing us. If he wasn't testing us, how would you account for the sorry state of our society? For the

crimes that plague the big cities of this country? When he could sweep this pestilence from the face of the earth with one mighty gesture of his hand. If our Lord wasn't testing us how would you account for the proliferation these days of this obscene rock and roll music with its gospel of easy sexuality and relaxed morality?" He basically says God could get rid of all of this junk that he doesn't approve of and thinks is corrupting the teens of his town, and since God hasn't, God must be testing them and their morals. It doesn't sink in to the teens though, if anything it just gives them fodder for mocking him as they drive around, yelling at the top of their lungs while blaring their music, "He is testing us!!!"

Here's the thing though...by the end of the movie, John Lithgow kind of comes to a realization, as he is standing in a field outside the warehouse where the senior prom is being held and his daughter is dancing up a storm, as he decides to dance with his wife. He realizes, by focusing so much on the whole rock 'n roll is noise pollution thing, he missed the fact that God actually was testing him...testing him by examining his patience, his flexibility, his ability to help his daughter grow into her own woman. As he was so busy trying to pass the test of keeping his town from being corrupted, he was perpetually failing the test of being a decent dad who listened to his daughter, invested in her life, and didn't seek to control her but journey with

her. He didn't see that yes, the Lord was testing him, just not in the way he was thinking, because he couldn't fathom the idea that he himself, his faith is what needed to be poked and prodded to see if it was up to code. He was so certain he was operating on a solid foundation and everyone else was crumbling, that he couldn't see the sand beneath his own two feet.

I want us to really reframe our thinking as we approach our gospel lesson this morning, because not only is this a text we've heard so many times we know it backwards and forwards, but it also has a word within in that brings lots of images into our heads that we need to set aside. We hear that Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness and our minds conjure up images of a little dude dressed up in red pajamas dancing around Jesus with a pitchfork, like hey, Jesus, you want some bread for your rumbling tummy? But that is absolutely not what we have going on here, which is why we need to rethink all of our preconceived notions about this text in order to figure out what it is saying to us today.

I would challenge us to think of this text instead as "the testing of Jesus by God's head of quality control," because that is really what is going on here. The devil as described by Luke here, is not capital D "Devil!" This is much more devil as in the accuser, the tester, the is everything really as it seems devil of Job. This is who God sends in to poke and prod and make

sure that the foundation of what God has built and created is up to code. The devil in this instance is literally the quality control guy. God is ready to send something out into the world and the devil comes along and pokes and prods to make sure there are no weak points, no cracks in the foundation that could cause all of it to crumble. Think about it, this is exactly what happened in the Garden of Eden. God created Adam and Eve and in came the serpent to test whether that creation was solid...but it wasn't, it crumbled instantly. So now, we have Jesus, a kind of second Adam on the brink of taking his ministry public, claiming his status as Messiah and Savior, and so God is double checking to make sure that all is well with God's Son's soul.

The devil pokes, prods, nudges, and pushes against any potential cracks that there might be in Jesus' sense of his own identity, his mission, his journey as the Messiah. The devil realizes that the greater the weight carried, the heavier the tests must be, and so each and every test places a little more pressure on Jesus' foundation, just waiting to see if he will buckle. The first is fairly straight forward, a test of Jesus' humanity, he's hungry, just like Adam and Eve in the Garden, Jesus is tempted first with food. You're hungry, you're the Son of God, make some bread out of these stones. It's a simple, small volley at the foundation, and Jesus is like, hard pass, I can survive on more than bread. The second gets trickier, testing

Jesus' desire for glory and authority, he could be worshipped, bowed down to without any of the messy effort of being the Messiah, it could just happen. Just like Adam and Eve who ate because they wanted to be like God, the devil asks Jesus if he wants to be God with the simple gesture of kneeling before the devil. Again, Jesus is like, nope, my worship is reserved for God, I'm good. Lastly, the devil presses as hard as possible. Test the limits of God's protection of you, God's Son. Let all the world see who you are, jump off the Temple and let the angels save you. If they do that everyone will worship you and again, none of this messy Messiah on the cross business. Just like Adam and Eve where the devil asked them to put God's words about the tree to the test, the devil asks Jesus to test what God has promised. For the final time, Jesus, probably feeling a bit of the pressure at this point says no, testing God is not his calling, following God is, and so the devil backs off. Test complete. For now. Jesus is operating on a rock solid foundation of knowing and trusting who he is.

Now, I am well aware that there are *a lot* of differences between us and Jesus, but I think in the context of this lesson, there is a very clear difference, and it's similar to what would be the difference between Jesus and John Lithgow in Footloose. Jesus was very clear what was being tested in him, his identity, his very being, his readiness for the path that lie ahead.

He didn't get that confused with anything else, he was able to pass these tests because he knew what was before him. Then there's us and John Lithgow. So often we tend to have zero proper concept of what within us is being tested. We will go on and on and on about how which books need to be banned and what music needs to be censored and what needs to be taught in school as though *those* are the ultimate tests of our faith, our humanity, our values. We will rant and rave on Facebook until we're blue in the face about these things that we believe are the most important things, the things the devil is trying to test us with, when the reality is...the tests of who we are, our common humanity, our identity as children of God, our faith usually come in the face to face interactions that we have with one another.

The test comes when we come face to face with someone who is homeless and instead of feeling empathy and compassion, we covertly roll up our windows and pound the gas pedal to get out of the intersection as fast as possible. The test comes when we come face to face with someone who disagrees with us and instead of still seeing them as a beloved child of God, we slander them, refuse to speak to them, and turn our backs on them because if they aren't with us then they're against us. The test comes when we come face to face with our BIPOC siblings and instead of seeing their humanity, we see their skin color and immediately feel fear. The test comes

when we come face to face with honest truths from our past, from our shared history and we try to censor it or tone it down because surely we can't be that blunt with kids about the reality of how we got to where we are as a country. The test comes when we come face to face with something that flies in the face of our faith and we go along with it because we're afraid of living out our faith too much, for fear of being different, for fear of having others judge us for living by the love and call of Christ.

Honestly, the ultimate test comes when we are presented with something that claims to be *the thing* that our faith is staked on, something as trivial and minor as dancing, and we put our whole force behind it saying *this is the thing* that is wrecking the church, the world, everything. The ultimate test is realizing that a lot of that stuff is just that...stuff, which can be ignored or shifted or at least taken down a notch from Defcon one. The real test of who we are as children of God, as claimed and called children of God is in how we treat each other, how we live out our faith with and for each other. The real test is whether or not we choose to live with compassion or judgment, peace or angst, empathy or criticism. The real test of our foundation is whether or not we're not only willing to see ourselves as the beloved children we are, but also if we're willing to see our siblings for the beloved children they are as well. **AMEN!!!**