

## What do you want to be known for?

March 9 2014

Luke 4:1-16

The first line of the obituary read like this: *If you're about to throw away an old pair of pantyhose, consider Mary Agnes "Pink" Mullaney.*

It was an obituary published in the Milwaukee Journal last September -- An obituary that went viral. You're used to seeing pictures of adorable puppies go viral, or videos of silly things that people say when they're coming out of anesthesia. (those crack me up) Makes sense that those go viral. But an obituary? Not so much.

Until you read the whole obituary. After that opening eye-catching line about pantyhose, it went on like this: *"We, her family, were blessed to learn many valuable lessons from Pink during her 85 years. Among them: never throw away old pantyhose. Use them to tie gutters, child-proof cabinets, fix toilet flappers, or hang Christmas ornaments." "Go to a nursing home and kiss everyone. "Correspond with the imprisoned. Offer rides to people carrying a big load or caught in the rain or in the summer heat." You see, Pink Mullaney's obituary wasn't just about her penchant for using pantyhose in a myriad useful ways. It was a testimony to a great lady written by family who clearly adored her, and admired her.*

It continued: *Leave a cold drink for the garbage collector. Take magazines you've already read to your doctor's offices for others to enjoy. Go to church with a chicken sandwich in your purse. After mass, give the chicken sandwich to your homeless friend, whom you have let keep warm in your car while you were at Mass." And this bit of advice, which is perhaps truly the reason the obituary went viral: "If a possum takes up residence in your shed, grab a barbecue brush to coax him out. If he doesn't leave, brush him for twenty minutes and let him stay." Yes, her daughter explained later, she really had done this. Scratched the possum's belly with a barbecue brush.*

I loved reading about the life of Pink, as, apparently, did a great many people. Reading this, you got a glimpse of a woman who clearly was her own person, and just as clearly was deeply good, truly compassionate. And I think for all of us reading it, you also couldn't help but think "What will someone write about me? How will I be remembered?"

What will I be known for? I've never used pantyhose to tie up a loose gutter; what will folks say about me?"

Big questions, right? What will I be known for? Big question. How would you answer? What do you want to be known for?

The scripture that Michelle read to you just now is all about Jesus wrestling with that very question. *What do I want to be known for?* It's the traditional scripture for the first Sunday in Lent, which is what today is. And it shows Jesus at the very beginning of it all, at the very beginning of his ministry. The last thing we've heard about him, back in chapter 3, was when he was 12, and hanging out in the temple in Jerusalem talking to the priests. But now he's 30ish, with a lot of years' experience as a carpenter. And one day he shows up on the banks of the River Jordan, and asks his cousin John the Baptist to baptize him, too, and then, it says, then he goes off into the wilderness, for 40 days.

Fun fact here: this is why Lent is forty days long, because of Jesus going off into the desert for 40 days. But why did he do that exactly? Hard to know, but it seems like he does it as kind of a spiritual retreat, kind of a chance to figure out what's about to happen, what God wants him to do next. He goes off the grid, unplugs -- not that there was anything to unplug from, I guess -- anyway, he goes off into emptiness for 40 days.

And after forty lonely days out there, Jesus gets a visit. From the Tempter, it says, from Satan, the Devil. And Satan has an offer for Jesus .... actually, several offers. He starts out by pointing out the obvious. "You must be hungry, Jesus," he says. "There's not a whole lot to eat out here in the desert. So why don't you take care of yourself? Why don't you use those magic powers that we both know God gave you, and turn these stones here into bread?" And Jesus looks him in the eye and says, "nope, I'm not going to do that -- scripture says "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word God speaks."

"Great answer," says Satan. "Okay then, forget the bread. I've got a much better offer anyway." And so he takes Jesus with him, it says, up to a high place, and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. And Satan says, "these are all pretty much under my

control right now. Tell you what, though, we can share power. These can be yours, with just one slight prerequisite. You need to worship **me**, not that God of yours." And Jesus says, "very nice of you to offer, thanks -- but no thanks, may I remind you of another piece of scripture, "Worship The Lord your God, serve only him."

And Satan says "you seem to have memorized an impressive amount of scripture. Now **I've** got some scripture for **you**." And the story says he takes Jesus up to the top of the temple of Jerusalem and says "Jesus, if you recall, and I'm sure you do, there's a passage in the Psalms that says "God will command his angels to lift you up" So, if you trust your God so much, let's see you jump off this tower and trust God's angels to lift you up. Look at all those people watching down there -- think how impressed they'll be." And Jesus shakes his head and says, "I've got one last scripture for you, Satan -- do not put The Lord your God to the test." And with that, *poof*, Satan disappears, the story says.

It's a strange story in many ways, asking you to picture Jesus and Satan flying through the air together, gazing at the world's kingdoms, peering over the edge of the temple. But what the story's saying, literally or metaphorically, what it's saying is that right at the start of his ministry, Jesus was really wrestling. Jesus was really struggling with who it was he was supposed to be. Jesus was finding himself tempted to be something different than what God wanted him to be. In other words, Jesus was agonizing over that very big question: What do I want to be known for? What do I want to be known for...

The temptations were very real: to use his power, his gifts, all for himself. Turn these stones to bread, said the Tempter, take care of yourself first. Be the King of the World, said the voice, all you have to do is turn your back on God. Dazzle the masses, urged that little devil on his shoulder, do something spectacular, jump off the temple and fly through the air, everyone will love you. Everyone.

But from deep within Jesus' spirit comes another voice: Who are you? Is that *really* what you want to be known for? And it's not. It's not. Jesus says to Satan, "that's not how I want to be known." And he walks out of the desert, and the story says the first thing he does is walk back to his hometown, to Nazareth, and into his hometown synagogue. And he picks up the scripture, the book of Isaiah, and he reads this: "The

spirit of The Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, and proclaim release to the captives."

**That** is how Jesus wanted to be known -- Not as a doer of useless magic, but a giver of healing and hope. Not as the king of earthly kingdoms but as the One who preached God's kingdom, This is what I will be known for, says Jesus. The one who brings release to the captives.

David and I went and saw "Son of God" on Wednesday, the new Jesus movie that took in huge box office revenue last weekend. It's gotten mixed reviews, and rightly so, it won't win any acting Oscars ... there's also been lots of silly debate over whether it's appropriate for Jesus to be really good-looking ... the actor playing him has inspired the Twitter hashtag HotJesus, and he does indeed bear a strong resemblance to Brad Pitt.

But there are things to like about the movie, and I'm actually *not* referring to the actor -- One of the things I truly *did* like is that it reminds us of what Jesus was known for, what he wanted to be known for ... all those things that he *chose* to be rather than being the attention-grabbing King that the Tempter tried to get him to be. For instance, the movie shows Jesus going out of his way to talk to a tax-collector who was reviled by everyone, a man named Matthew; and he doesn't just talk to this lowlife guy, he invites him, on the spot, to be one of his disciples. A shocking, unpopular, inclusive, loving, thing to do. And that's what Jesus was known for.

The movie shows him stepping in when a woman accused of adultery is about to be stoned to death, challenging her accusers to look inside their own hearts and getting them to back down. Well, yes. He did that. That's the kind of thing Jesus was known for.

"He gives people second chances" one of his followers says, and yes, he did, yes, that's what Jesus wanted to be known for.

Why does any of this matter? Well, because, of course, all of it is a reminder of what God would like **us** to be known for. At the heart of our faith is this belief: that God became one of us, was born as one of us, to show us how we are meant to be. Jesus, child of God, son of God, completely God, and completely human, born in this place to show us the way. To teach us what we should want to be known for. And what we

should be known for is -- just like Jesus -- being bringers of Good News. Bringers of Good News. He has sent me, Jesus said, to bring good news -- to proclaim release to the captives.

Tonight, this evening, back here in the Parlor, we're having our monthly book chat. And what we're going to be talking about tonight is a book called 'A House in the Sky', the book which is Fairfield's *One book/One Town* selection this year. It's a memoir written by Amanda Lindhout, the photojournalist who was kidnapped for ransom in Somalia in 2008, at the age of 27. She was kept captive for 15 months by a gang of young men ... and that's all I'll say. And this is her story, told bravely and painfully. I am glad I read it - - it was as hard a book to read as I have ever read, but I would not have wanted to miss the chance to know this young woman.

And what is extraordinary to me is how Amanda Lindhout has chosen to answer the question, 'what do I want to be known for.' She will be known as a survivor, yes; yes, she is known for that. But since the end of her ordeal, she has committed herself to being known as one who cares deeply for Somalia, the land of her captivity. She has established a foundation to provide education and empowerment in that land of deprivation, because even in the midst of her suffering, astonishingly, she was able to see her captors as boys who were themselves victims. She has spoken publicly, repeatedly, of her forgiveness. Her forgiveness.

And in an interview I saw with her, Amanda Lindhout said this: "Every day I ask myself, "who do I want to be?" Every day I have many choices to make about who I want to be. And I want always to be someone who believes that at its essence the world is a good place." And so she works to make it so.

So Amanda Lindhout will be known not just as the captive who was herself released, but as one who brings release to the captives, and good news to the poor. "For this The Lord has anointed me" Jesus said, in his synagogue in Nazareth. "This is what I want to be known for."

What do you want to be known for? That's the question God asks us in this Lenten season. That's the question Christ asks, as the journey to Easter begins. What do you want to be known for?

In the end, it may be the only question that matters. May we answer it well.  
Amen.