

First Sunday of Lent
March 13, 2011
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Scriptures: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-1

Temptation is Real

Nowadays there is a lot of talk out there about temptations. This talk comes from ordinary, everyday people. You hear about it on the street, at the gym, when you are having your morning coffee, and even at night around the dinner table. People talk about a certain, pesky kind of temptation that lurks everywhere, a great temptation to sin.

Sorry to disappoint you, but we are not talking about stealing, or cheating, or lying. Those are the temptations that Charlie Sheen has to fight, which by the way, is what keeps us entertained lately during the evening gossip news. The temptation is not to challenge God or to put Jesus on trial. Nope, the temptation most everybody around talk about is about eating. Our modern mortal challenge is whether or not we should put into our mouths that innocent pastry in the morning. I must say a temptation to which most of us regularly fall for. We know it hurts our bodies, but we do it all the same, which reveals that we are not in complete control of our lives.

So, okay, I guess I'm not being completely serious here. Nowhere in the Bible do we find a condemnation to even the coolest calorie feast we can think of. We can probably agree that too much good food and drink put an unnecessary strain on our bodies and although it is a shame, we would not necessarily call it a "sin against God." Nevertheless, that does not give us a blank check for self indulgence. Everything is better when done in moderation. The reason to talk about this is because it would seem like we have watered down the meaning and significance of being tempted. We seem to talk more about temptation when we refer to the trivial decisions we do in our daily lives rather than those actions and lacks of action that threaten our spiritual lives. When there is plenty of bad stuff we are constantly tempted with, why would we call food a temptation?

And yet, we seem to be in good company. It would seem that even the most trivial of things provide grounds for some of the most challenging temptations. Isn't that how Jesus was tempted first while in the dessert? In the first encounter between Jesus and the devil, the Achilles heel is that of the need for survival. Strange as it may sound, this temptation is about determining what is it that people need the most. Apparently the devil is very concerned with meeting the basic needs that people have. To guarantee the essentials like food, clothing, housing. And in fact, experience seems to say that devil is up to something here. When we have our necessities satisfied, we tend to get complacent. When our needs are met, we get quiet, we relax, we let go of our worries. Prosperity lessens tension like nothing else. When our hunger is satisfied, we become happy and comfortable.

Jesus seems to think otherwise. His view of those around him is not limited to the external, most apparent needs. There are far more important things that people are in need of. The questions of those around him seem to go beyond the basic needs. Where have I come from? Where is God? What's the purpose of what's happening in my life? And

probably the most important question of all, that of the meaning of evil and suffering. The Son of God has come to answer those questions. Not in the conventional ways they were being responded to, and certainly not in the ways we would imagine. And although at first it would seem like a foolish act of self-sacrifice, the cross turns out to be what God used to save those who were under the yoke of sin. Those inward needs are what Jesus is looking at.

Now, Jesus does not deny that people need bread to sustain their lives. The feeding miracles in the gospels show that he took this issue seriously. But as he would say to the tempter, he knows that human beings do not live by bread alone. The restlessness and constant search of our soul for meaning, for deliverance, for peace cannot be ignored. That's what he has come to provide and he will keep to that goal. Against this the devil has nothing to say, so the first round of this spiritual battle is lost.

The second temptation is about gaining the attention. What good is the best message you can preach, if there no one to reach it with? Those who want to be heard and followed must draw the attention to themselves in order to accomplish something. Any advertising person will know that you need a gimmick, something that will catch the attention of people. The devil seems to know this very well and so he advises Jesus to jump off the roof of the temple. Can you imagine a better trick than to be caught in mid air by the angels of God? It is as if the devil is saying, "Well yeah, people do not leave of bread alone; they also need to be entertained. Go ahead, do it; they'll love it and they'll love you."

Jesus may share this vision, but only in part. He does know that the message has to find attention, but not the volatile, fast kind. That kind of attention is short lived and superficial. It lasts but for a moment and then when the excitement is gone, everybody turns away. The attention Jesus is looking for is the kind in which people are interested in having their hearts touched and their faith challenged. And it is this kind of attention that Jesus gets by the suffering that he has taken upon himself. Not the kind of message that will get a lot attention? Maybe. Even Paul knows that it is a challenge when he speaks about the message of the cross in his letter to the Corinthians. But it is a message that speaks about the love of God poured out in sacrifice for others and that is a message that will grab the attention of those who believe in God's redemption. This is a completely different attention-grabbing message than the one the devil had in mind. It doesn't grab your attention because of its marvel; it grabs your attention because of the love expressed in it.

For the third temptation, the devil goes all out. He goes for the jugular. This one is for all the marbles. He throws a "Hail Mary" to the end zone hoping to win the game. If this one is successful he wins Jesus over to his side. What could be any better than that? You may think this is foolishness; how can the devil tempt the Son of God to worship him? Jesus is God and God can't turn against himself. But as with the first two temptations there is real danger here. This is about masquerading an evil with a supposed good.

Jesus rejects this offer. But not only that, he also makes it clear that he and the devil are on quite opposite sides. Jesus' rejection is not merely a disapproval of the devil's desire to turn Jesus away from God; it is also an affirmation of a deep seated anchoring on God. And that's what's so very particular about Jesus. He knows where he has come from. He

knows what he wants to do. He knows what the warrant behind his desire to serve is. And he doesn't know that because he is God's son, but because he has chosen God as his anchor. He is not being made to follow a path, he is choosing a path. The cross is not an unavoidable tragedy; the cross is an optional mission that Jesus chooses for himself. He anchors himself in God. Against that the devil has nothing to do.

So what's in all this for us? Two very important things. First that temptation is not merely that which we feel like doing, but that which we feel guilty about. That falls in the same category as wanting to eat more than you should. Temptation is that which intends for us to be self serving. Temptation is that which invites to make ourselves the center of attention. Temptation is that which attempts to take us away from God. It is very real, as real as God, as real as the devil himself. And then, we also learn that the way to overcome temptation is by keeping our eyes on both the start and the goal. We have come from God, and we are going back to God. Jesus did not avoid temptation. He worked through temptation by keeping anchored in God. Amen.