

“The Gift of Temptation”

March 18, 2018

Gifts of the Dark Wood series – 5th Sunday in Lent

The temptation of Jesus is a Scripture that usually begins our Lenten journey. We start with Jesus in the wilderness – having just experienced baptism by water and the Spirit’s presence and the voice calling him Beloved Son. I’ll admit that I feel for Jesus – to go from the joy of baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, and then be thrust into this difficult place. 40 days in the desert - already hungry, thirsty, alone – and the devil comes.

And I’ll confess that when I think about Jesus and the devil (or Satan, sometimes called the Adversary, or whatever name you want to use), it makes me uneasy. Yes, it’s Jesus – Son of God, Savior of the world – but in all his humanity, this spiritual battle is a tough one.

I think about the reality of Jesus’ temptation. There’s some consolation that Jesus faces temptation. He shares the deep struggles of our humanity. But it’s difficult to picture. Maybe we have an image of what Jesus looks like in our minds, but what does the devil look like?

Artists across the centuries have portrayed the devil as an angel of darkness; some have even made the devil look like another human being. I was struck by author Anne Rice who writes that the devil looks like Jesus himself. In her account of Jesus’ temptation, Jesus faces a mirror image of himself, which makes the temptation even more powerful. It’s probably safe to assume that the devil isn’t a red figure with horns and a pitchfork. Evil is usually a little more sinister, manipulative, and conniving than that.

Perhaps our mind’s picture of the devil doesn’t matter so much, but it’s interesting to consider the nature of the temptation. Jesus isn’t tempted with awful things. He’s not up against sins of greed, lust, pride, anger, envy, sloth, or gluttony (remember our seven deadly sins?). Really, the temptation he faces is to do good, but it’s not the good he’s called to do. We might call it the “wrong good.”

Eric Elnes claims that all of us have fallen to the temptation to do the “wrong good” somewhere along the way. We’re surrounded by opportunities to do good work, but sometimes it’s not ours to do. Charles Schultz may help us to hear the message in cartoon form: **(SLIDE)** Peanuts cartoon: Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?

Part of the journey with God is discovering our vocation – our calling from God. This isn’t the same as our occupation, though they may be connected. Yes, there are many things we can do, but we can’t do everything, and we probably shouldn’t do everything. It’s a constant struggle – to discover our calling and live into it. This is a part of what Jesus faces in temptation – to claim his identity and his calling.

Consider the three offers. First, turn the stones into bread. Jesus is hungry, for sure, but he could feed all who are hungry! He does that in his ministry, but it's not his sole calling. Bread alone isn't the answer; Jesus becomes the Bread of Life.

Second, worship the devil and have power - endless political power - even power to do good and make peace. Jesus brings peace, but not necessarily through worldly structures, though he certainly challenges the politics of his day. But his worship is for God alone. In the Gospel of John, He says that his peace is different than what the world gives. It's peace that permeates and changes the heart from living with fear to living with faith.

Lastly, jump from the top of the Temple so everyone knows you're the Son of God. Surely that will gain Jesus some followers because miracles like that are powerful. But testing God isn't what Jesus will do, and miracles won't be the only way that people come to believe, though they are important in his ministry.

Jesus uses this opportunity (if we want to call it that) to really define his life and ministry. He will not be the One who goes for the quick answer to immediate needs. Bread for the hungry isn't the end of his mission. He will feed people and meet needs, but he offers new life and hope that outlasts a simple meal.

He will not be the One who worships anyone else except God. Power over others isn't the end of his mission. He will not be the One who does wonders just so others believe. Certainty isn't the end of his mission; faith and trust and relationship with God are his goal.

One thing that's clear is that Jesus doesn't simply jump into these offers to do good. Perhaps it's a reminder to us to be more discerning and prayerful. Here's some good advice - **(SLIDE)** *When faced with temptation, hit the pause button.* Take some time to pray and consider your calling even when the opportunity is something good.

One tool that might help us to discover our calling is to know our spiritual gifts. Some of you have completed an inventory that offers some guidance about knowing our spiritual gifts from God and using them in ministry. It's a start as we discern how to do the right good that we're called to do.

The same is true for churches. We can't do everything. We can't get involved in every mission and ministry opportunity as a congregation. However, we can focus on our mission to make disciples and make sure that what we're doing, how we're serving, and where we're headed falls in line with God's call on us together.

You heard this morning about a new opportunity to be connected to a ministry in Africa. Our Missions Team has been praying about this connection since we met missionaries last summer. We pray it's the right good - to offer God's love and the gift of mobility - as a way that we're transforming the world for Christ.

God wants us to serve with joy - with our whole hearts. God doesn't want us to be exhausted and devoid of joy, although sometimes we think that's the indicator that we're serving well - when we're sacrificing everything and unable to find joy.

That seems contrary to what God calls us to do and to be - to find joy in serving and let that joy show through so that others are attracted to it. How many of us would be excited about a relationship with God if someone who loves God didn't show joy?

Perhaps you've experienced a time when you were exhausted and not joyful even when you were doing something well and serving others. I can recall a few times when someone who was gifted in a certain area and was doing great ministry found themselves in a place where they weren't feeling called and joyful. Sometimes it's hard to admit because we feel badly or selfish, but perhaps there are other opportunities where our calling can be realized.

Eric Elnes says, "The Spirit beckons us not to be good, but to be human—humble, of the *humus*—which ultimately means finding your elemental waters (perhaps remembering our baptism), which are connected to God, and living into your fullest energies. You can (and will) do a lot of good by walking the path that brings you most fully alive in this world, but in order to stay on this path, you must learn to say no to doing a great many "good" things." You received a rock today. When do we need to say "NO!" so that we can say "YES!" to the right good and follow God's path more closely?

We may think of accepting the gift of God's salvation only as the gift of being saved from sin and death, but a part of the gift is moving with God into the future. In good Methodist terms, it's about prevenient grace that comes before we even realize it and accept. Justifying grace is active when we realize our need for God's salvation, and sanctifying grace is what moves us to continue to grow in holiness. It doesn't stop when we say "yes" to Jesus; we continue to grow and be transformed. Hear these words:

(SLIDE) II Corinthians 5: 16-19 (NRSV)

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. **So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

We are a new creation, and we continue to grow in love and grace.

Thomas a Kempis says, "We usually know what we can do, but temptation shows us who we are." And I would add that temptation can show us who we're called to be. The opportunities to do good surround us, but we can't do everything. Discovering God's call on our lives is vital.

So are we willing to accept temptation as a gift when it comes to how we serve and allow the Spirit to guide us - not simply relying on what makes sense or what we should do, but letting God speak to us and pushing us to look beyond what's expected?

May God help us discover the right good that we're called to do, and may the Spirit lead us in grace and joy.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

Each week we are taking time to reflect on the gifts we receive in the dark wood. This week, you have a finger labyrinth in your bulletin. It might look like a maze, but actually labyrinths are an ancient Christian practice that was designed for an experience of pilgrimage. You are invited to slowly follow the path with your finger, into the middle and then out again, opening to and listening for the intuition, the still, small voice, nudging you in the path that brings your life the most fullness.