

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
February 2, 2020  
Title: Temptation and Priorities  
Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7  
Matthew 4:1-11

God works in mysterious ways. The gospel reading we just heard is not the assigned reading for today. It is actually the assigned reading for the first Sunday of Lent, but several weeks ago, during my time of worship planning for Lent, I believe God led me to switch some things around. We'll be doing something that is off lectionary for Lent, but a couple of the Lenten scriptures are so important that I didn't want to miss the opportunity for us to reflect upon them. One of them is today's reading about Jesus' temptation.

I think that the story of Jesus' temptation is important for us as Christians because it is one of the best examples we have of Jesus being fully human. One of the unique tenets of Christianity is that we believe that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. There are some people who don't want to believe that Jesus could ever have been really tempted in the wilderness like we read today, but for me it is really important because it is a vivid example of how Jesus can truly understand what we experience as humans.

I think that has been particularly important this week, because I suspect that there have been a lot of people dealing with temptations. Certainly, we face temptations of some sort pretty much every day. Some of them are small and easy to deal with while others may be much more difficult. We may find ourselves struggling against an impulse to respond one way or another and sometimes that takes the form of internal debates about the pros and cons of each response and what it means.

The temptations we face are likely different for each of us; although we may also share some of the more common ones. Some of us struggle with the temptation of whether to have a second helping of food, or that really delicious looking dessert or whether to choose vegging out over exercising. When we face those kinds of challenges, the real temptation behind it is to do it tomorrow rather than today – what difference will it make if I wait until tomorrow to exercise – except that tomorrow I will face the same challenge, the same temptation, and likely make the same decision.

It was at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that he went out into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and to pray, to spend time talking with God, listening and getting his priorities straight before he started teaching and healing. I think it is important for us to recognize that the temptations Jesus faced were real.

After a long period of not eating, it would have been a real temptation to turn some of the stones into bread and what would be the harm in doing that? The real temptation, however, wasn't about feeding himself as a person who was starving, but rather about taking shortcuts, about being a magician, about using his powers for himself.

Another temptation was about showing that he could get God to intervene in the natural law of gravity and protect Jesus from getting hurt when his human body fell to the ground. But the real temptation was to test God, to manipulate God and force God to do something.

The third temptation was for Jesus to become popular and become the ruler of all the nations on the earth; but it would have involved worshipping something other than God. It would have meant abandoning what was the most important thing, putting God first.

As Jesus was beginning his earthly public ministry, this was an important time, because as he would heal people, as people began to listen to his teachings and follow him, it would have been easy to let it all go to his head, to inflate his ego so that he became the center of his ministry, rather than God being the center. Early on, Jesus faced all of these temptations and trusting only in God, he was able to keep his priorities in order and resist the temptations that are so difficult for us as humans.

Because the reality is that we face temptations too and that's what I've been thinking about a lot this week. The temptations that Jesus faced, putting himself first, manipulating or testing God, grand or spectacular actions to gain attention, putting anything before else before God, are temptations that we all face in one form or another.

This week, the eyes of our nation have been focused on the impeachment trial in the Senate. I've been interested in what might be going through the hearts and minds of the people who took an oath to be "impartial jurors". I especially thought about it in terms of how they might be making decisions and what factors, or temptations, played into that.

If you, or I, were a senator this week, think of some of the temptations that we might have faced. Regardless of your political party, whether or not to go along with peer pressure would be a big one. If I vote to hear witnesses, how will those who voted for me respond? Will I secure another term in the senate or will I find myself out of office? What's more important, my future security, the opinions and votes of others, the pressure from my party, the desire to know the truth?

What would be the results or side effects of these decisions? If I vote to hear witnesses, will I hear things that make it easy for me to believe in the president's innocence or will I be convinced that he is guilty? And

depending upon what I believe, will I have the courage to vote based on this, or will other things – my future, my security, my desire to be accepted by my peers and constituency be more powerful? When it comes down to the bottom line, what really are my priorities? What do I claim is most important and what will my actions say about what really is most important to me?

I suspect that for some of the senators these temptations and struggles might not have even existed. I am sure that some believe so strongly in their position that these were non-issues, things that were already decided a long time ago.

But senators, and political office holders are not the only ones who are facing temptations and questions of priorities and tough decisions. I believe that each of us faces similar temptations, questions, decisions – even though they are different for different people.

As a congregation, we also face some temptations. Last Sunday, 16 of us gathered in the afternoon to talk with Rick McKinley and each other as we reviewed the results of the Discover the Possibilities study that we did in October. What we do with the results of that study involves temptations and questions for us as well.

Rick was very clear with us that many of the churches that do this kind of study end up with a long report that gets filed in someone's drawer or stored on someone's computer and nothing else ever happens. That's a temptation that we face. It's the temptation to stay comfortable with ourselves, to ignore what is happening around us, go along as we have been and let the work that went into that study culminate in a nice event one afternoon a few months ago.

We can read the report and get excited and decide that we need to do something – anything – that will help us reach out to more people, or make us more visible or show that we care. Some of us will be eager to take actions to fix something or change something or anything. Rick suggested to us that this could be just as dangerous as doing nothing – IF we start running around in many different directions without any real plan or rhyme or reason to what we are doing.

One of the things that came out of that meeting, I think, was a decision to use a book called, “Roadmap to Renewal”. Rick said that if we use it well, it will help us produce an action plan for where we are going. Now, let me tell you, that my ears always perk up at the idea of reading a book – one of my temptations is to read a book about a subject and fill myself with head knowledge of something. It makes me feel like I’m accomplishing something, but truthfully, what it usually means is that I can talk more intelligently about the subject but still might not be doing anything about it or have no idea about what to do. So, I’m going to need help from others to make sure that I don’t take the easy way which for me is to read another book and think that is an action, without actually taking action. It’s a real temptation for me.

As we look at all of this, we will find ourselves facing many temptations and it’s important for us to look at them honestly, ask others to help us look at them and what they really mean to us and identify which temptations are particularly powerful for each of us. Every church says that it wants to grow and that it wants to welcome new people. Every church believes that it is friendly and welcoming and so we don’t understand why people don’t just rush inside our doors to be part of the wonderful community that we believe ourselves to be.

Some years ago, I was serving as pastor of a church where within a couple of years the Sunday morning worship attendance had gone from about 60 to 100. It was the fulfillment of a dream, right? I was surprised when my DS told me that he had met someone from the church who told him that she knew she should be happy about all the people who were coming to church, but she wasn't; because she didn't know who they were, and it didn't feel like her church anymore. She was admitting a hard reality – a temptation that we face – do we really want something to change or do we want things to stay just the way they are because that's what is most comfortable for us?

I heard in a report this week, that people often say they are afraid of change, but that it is not really change that we are afraid of, it is loss. Every change, whether it is something we have chosen or not involves loss and gain. When we have a new baby, there are many wonderful gains to that, but there is also loss of freedom and ability to pick up and move at a moment's notice. When we marry or divorce, start a new job or retire, move into a new place; there are always gains and losses. Depending upon whether or not we chose the change and whether see it as positive or negative, makes a difference on whether we focus more on the losses or the gains.

It is that way with the church – with any decision to change something or not to change something. There will always be both gains and losses; and for us, we will always face temptations that pull at us as we face those decisions. However, one thing that I can be sure of, is whether we like it or not, whether we plan it or not, there will always be change around us and we will have to decide how we will live with that change.

One of the big temptations for us is whether we are tempted to do things that we like and that are comfortable for us or whether we will do the things that we believe God is calling us to do. Sometimes, at least, we hope that they are the same, but that is not always true. William Temple, was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940's. He reminded people that "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." We are called not to draw attention to ourselves but to point to God. We are supposed to be a "sign that we offer to the world that there is something beyond ourselves that inspires and leads us forward."<sup>i</sup>

The one thing that we can be sure of, is that no matter what changes in our lives, or in our church, or in any other part of our life, we will never face those changes alone. When we are tempted to move in one direction or not to move at all, we know that Jesus faced temptations as well and that he looked to God to give him his priorities and to keep him on track.

If we faithfully seek God's direction in our conversations and in all our actions, then we will find ourselves on the right path moving in the right direction. I want to invite us back to a prayerful commitment that the Next Chapter team offered to us several months ago. It is a simple prayer; but it is one that asks us to be honest about the temptations we face and what we might prefer. "God, open my eyes that I might see my church as You see it. Let me see where change needs to take place, even if it is painful to me. And use me, I pray, to be an instrument of that change whatever the cost."<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Roadmap to Renewal. Location 316.

<sup>ii</sup> Autopsy of a Deceased Church. Prayerful Commitment #1