

The Gift of Temptation

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 15, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 4:1-13](#)

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Many of you know that my first ministry was as a chaplain in the Contra Costa County juvenile hall. Some of the kids locked up there had been arrested and charged with selling controlled substances. Most of them saw their incarcerations (or at least they claimed they saw their incarcerations) as being part of the overhead of doing business. Sure, selling drugs was technically illegal, but that didn't make it wrong – at least not in their minds. They saw themselves as entrepreneurs selling a product that was in demand. If they were arrested from time to time, that was just part of the cost of doing business.

My personal concern about the selling of pot was the fact that I knew that street level sales were supporting much larger criminal enterprises. Getting the kids arrested for selling pot to care about that was a non-starter. Of greater concern to me personally was the selling of rock cocaine. I knew that crack sales were connected to gang activity and gang violence. I knew that crack use was destroying lives and families and neighborhoods. And I discovered that it was impossible to get the kids who had been arrested for selling crack to care about these larger societal concerns. I looked for another way to get them concerned about their business practices.

I found one biblical story that would cause at least some of the kids to stop and think about what they were doing. That story is the one we heard today, the story of the temptation of Jesus. The story takes place immediately after Jesus' baptism. He comes up out of the water and hears the voice of God calling him, "Beloved," as the Holy Spirit pour out upon him. Then, filled with that Holy Spirit, Jesus moves out into the wilderness, out into the desert to fast and pray. During that time of prayer and fasting, Jesus is confronted with temptations.

The way the story tells it, Jesus comes face to face with the devil. In the confrontation, the devil articulates three temptations. The first (in the order of Luke's telling of the story) is to turn stone into bread. The second is to bow down and worship the devil and, in return, the devil will give him rulership over the nations of the earth. The third is the temptation to jump off the pinnacle of the temple so that God will have to intervene and save Jesus, thus proving that Jesus is God's beloved child. Another way to frame those temptations is with these lies: (a) if you're hurting in some way (like being hungry), you can do whatever you need to so that you feel good; (b) you can do whatever you want to so that you feel powerful; and (c) doing this thing (jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple) isn't going to kill you.

I suggested to these child-drug-dealers that they were peddling the same lies. Go ahead and take this drug; it will make you feel good right away. Go ahead and take this drug; it'll make you feel powerful. Go ahead and take this drug; it's not going to kill you. I invited these teens to reflect on this question: do you want to be peddling the same lies as the devil?

I have no idea if this biblical interpretation made any difference. I suspect not. What it did to is give me a frame for interpreting the story we heard, a frame that has been upset by the writing of Eric Elnes. Elnes suggests that, rather than looking at the temptations as temptations to do something evil, the temptations were temptations to do something good. Talk about interpretations that make you go, “HMMMMMMMM.”

But think about it. Think about all the good you could do, all the hunger you could end if you could turn stones into bread. And I bet I’m not the only one who is wished, from time to time, that I could be a benevolent dictator of the entire earth to enact laws and policies that I think would bring healing and greater wholeness to the planet. And if I had the ability to perform amazing miracles, I would be tempted to use that ability to bring healing and greater wholeness to a few people – or more than a few.¹

“The point is [that] none of these activities would harm anyone,” writes Elnes. “Not initially, anyway and Jesus does feed the hungry, changed the political equation, and performed miracles at various points in his ministry. Yet none of these individual activities were the ones that Jesus was called to devote all his time and energy to....

“There is a world of difference between doing good, and doing the specific good that you are called to do. The spirit beckons us not to be good, but to be human – humble, of the *humus* – which ultimately means finding your elemental waters, 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.

“Jesus’ purpose and true power was not realized through feeding the hungry or practicing politics or performing miracles, even as each of these surely was a part of his path. Devoting his entire life’s work to them was too small a calling for Jesus. God called him to something far higher. Part of Jesus calling was to live more fully into his *human*



identity than anyone else had ever done before. In doing so, Jesus reveals how much the rest of us resemble Pinocchio by comparison – how much we’re not our true selves. Jesus also reveals that the more we draw from the source of our highest energies, thereby living into our true identity, the more we resemble actual divinity. That’s because in order to follow our best path in the world, we’ve got to move off the path of common wisdom and start following a path marked by God’s lightning flashes and thunder claps – those gut hunches and reverberations of peace and joy that emanate from the spirit.”²

This picture is *The Second Temptation* by the English poet, painter, and printmaker William Blake. The man on the right who we see in profile is Jesus. The man on the left, nearly naked, does not look like

¹ Eric Elnes, *Gifts of the Dark Wood* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 116-119.

² *Ibid*, 117-118.

much of a devil to me. No horns, no tail; no pitchfork. He looks pious not sinister. In fact, he seems to have a halo or crown around his head. If I didn't know the title of this work of art, I might think the man on the left to be Moses or Elijah. Elnes thinks this artwork is deeply insightful. Blake, he says, understood that Jesus would not be tempted by overt evil. No, what would tempt Jesus is goodness, and so the devil is presented as a good man.

We, on the other hand, may have to deal with the temptation of evil from time to time. I suspect, however, that even then it isn't a real temptation. More likely, it is a fantasy. We may fantasize pushing someone who is really annoying out a window or ridding the world of a tyrant, but we would not seriously consider actually doing it. Like Jesus, you are more likely to be tempted by goodness, tempted to do the wrong good, tempted to do the good that is not yours to do, tempted to do someone else's good.

The gift of temptation can be related to the gift of getting lost, the gift of the Dark Wood we looked at last week. Last week I said that getting lost can be a gift when we respond to it by being still long enough for God's amazing grace to find us. The thing is, sometimes we think we're getting found by God's amazing grace because we sense a call, a nudge, and encouragement that is in the direction of goodness. If, however, that good we're feeling nudged toward isn't *our* good, it isn't really God's amazing grace that's found us. Instead, we've been found by temptation. And, paradoxically, this is how temptation can be a gift.

If we follow this nudging and the results include things like deeper confusion, greater exhaustion, even burnout, then that nudging has been temptation, not grace. Confusion, exhaustion, and burnout are signs that you're not on a path that is central to who you are. And that realization is a gift. Temptation is a gift because it helps you discern your best path. Sometimes that best path may be for the moment, for these circumstances. Sometimes that best path may be for this season or for a portion of your life. And sometimes that best path can be for a lifetime.

Howard Thurman is quoted as saying, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."³ I'm not sure I completely agree with him. I think knowing what the world needs is an important part of discerning our best path. The gift of temptation reminds us that asking what the world needs is not sufficient to discerning our best path. I prefer what Frederick Buechner wrote: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁴

Discerning where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet is not easy. Temptation, when examined honestly and directly, can be a gift in helping with that discernment. Amen.

³ See, for instance, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1199050-don-t-ask-yourself-what-the-world-needs-ask-yourself-what>.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 118-119, quoted on <http://www.calledthejourney.com/blog/2014/12/17/frederick-buechner-on-calling> (posted 22 December 2014; accessed 14 August 2021).

Questions for reflection:

- When have you chosen to do a good that, in retrospect, you realize wasn't *your* good to do?
- What makes you come alive at this time in your life's journey?
- Where do you see your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meeting?