

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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The Voice of the Tempter

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. – Luke 4:1-11

Back in the 1920's an alcoholic man spent a year in therapy with the famous psychiatrist Carl Jung, but made no progress at all. After a year in therapy, he was still drinking as much as before. Finally Jung threw up his hands and said that that he didn't know how to help this unfortunate man, that further therapy would be a waste of time and money. This man asked, "Is there no hope for me then? Is there nothing you can suggest? And Jung replied, "the only thing I can suggest is that you might seek a religious conversion. I have heard a reports of a few people who underwent religious conversions and stopped drinking. It makes a kind of sense to me."

The man took Jung at his word and went out seeking a religious conversion. It took him six years, but he underwent a religious conversion and stopped drinking.

Soon afterwards, he bumped into one of his old drinking buddies, a man by the name of Ebby, and Ebby said, "Hey, have a drink." But this man said, "No, I don't drink anymore." "What do you mean, you don't drink?" Ebby replied. "You're a hopeless alcoholic just like me." So the man told him his story, and about his religious conversion, and how he had stopped drinking.

Ebby thought that sounded like a good idea, so he began searching for a religious conversion of his own. It took him two years. And he too was able to stop drinking. Soon after he ran into his old drinking buddy Bill, who said, "Hey Ebby, have a drink." Ebby said he didn't drink anymore, and Bill was astonished. "What do you mean, you don't drink anymore? You're a hopeless alcoholic just like me!" So Ebby told Bill the story of his religious conversion, and how he had been able to stop drinking.

Bill thought that sounded like a good idea, so he too went in search of a religious conversion. With the combined wisdom of Ebby and the other man, it didn't take him nearly as long. It only took two weeks, and shortly thereafter he and his friend Dr. Bob started the first chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous in Akron, Ohio. Ever

since then, A.A. or Alcoholics Anonymous has been teaching people how to experience a religious conversion, a experience of a higher power which touches them precisely at the place where they are weakest, where they are powerless over alcohol.

About twenty years later, when A.A. was flourishing and beginning to spread around the world, Bill, better known in AA circles as Bill W., wrote to that famous psychiatrist Carl Jung, to tell him this story and how he had inadvertently played a part in the beginnings of AA. Jung wrote back an absolutely fascinating letter. He said that he was terribly glad that Bill W. had written to him; he was glad to know that his patient had such a good outcome and had contributed to the improvement of thousands of others. But he also said that he was particularly glad because he thought it was no accident that we traditionally refer to alcoholic drinks as spirits, and that perhaps alcoholics are people who have a greater thirst for the spirit than others. [adapted from M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, , p. 137-8]

In fact, addiction, as modern brain science is revealing, is the craving for the release of neurotransmitters like Norepinephrine and Dopamine that give us a momentary high, a brief sense of bliss and warmth, what in religious language we call Paradise or the Garden of Eden. So Mark Vonnegut, son of the famous novelist, writing about his addiction to drugs, entitled his book *The Eden Express*. It is, of course, as impossible to go back to the garden of Eden as it is to go back to the womb. The road to paradise is not the easy way, but the long and hard road through the wilderness, and addicts who have a powerful yearning for bliss, are going the wrong way, back instead of forward.

In the same way, the story of Jesus' temptations is also a story about someone with a tremendous thirst for the spirit, having to reject the easy but false paths to God, from the difficult but true ways. Jesus has been fasting for forty days, and the first temptation is to assuage his hunger, and not just his hunger, but the daily hunger faced by so many of his friends and neighbours. He could be a prophet like Moses, who fed his people Manna in their wilderness. It is the temptation of easy charity, but it ultimately doesn't transform people's lives because it doesn't transform their desires, their expectations, their lives.

The next temptation is the temptation of easy power, to become a king like David, with all of the opportunities that power creates, but Jesus realizes that easy power involves a high cost, the cost of worshipping the gods of militarism and violence.

The third temptation is that of easy religion, to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in an act of apparent complete faith, and so to fulfil the prophet Malachi's prediction that the Messiah would appear suddenly in the temple. But Jesus realizes that such a display of faith is really an act of non-faith, a testing of God rather than confidence in God. It too, proves to be an easy, but false path to God.

At this, the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus has to reject the conventional but false wisdom about what success and power were, before he could begin to get a sense of God's way of success and power. He had to reject the easy but superficial ways, in order to understand the more difficult but profound way of life. In order to say Yes to God, he first had to say No to the voice of the tempter.

In the same way, most of the temptations that face us are the temptations to seek fulfillment in ways that ultimately cannot provide that fulfillment. Sexual temptation is the search for pleasure and intimacy without the struggle of relationship and commitment. Temptations to eat chocolate or fatty foods often have little to do with physical hunger and everything to do with emotional hungers. And often advertising tempts us to seek freedom or adventure by buying a car or acquiring the right credit card. We all rationally know those things cannot provide what is promised, but the advertising appeals to deep emotional cravings, which is why it works.

Many of the temptations that we face however, are not the obvious things that we think of when we think of temptations. Everyone in Jesus' time expected the Messiah to be like Moses or David, and most people went along with those expectations. What Jesus identified as temptations, everyone else saw as the most noble of aspirations. In the same way today, there are some things that almost everyone considers good which are still something short of the life to which God calls us. Temptations are not just individual. They are also social, ways in which we are tempted as communities and societies. It is much easier to just pursue our own well being than it is to work for a truly just society in which everyone will be well off. It is much easier to allow everyone to go their own way than to do the hard work of discerning the common good. It is much easier to promote an easy, superficial tolerance of other's differences than to build a genuine community.

In these forty days of Lent, we are called to reject the easy but ultimately false roads that constantly tempt us, and to seek to discern the true but difficult path which God places before us. One practice that helps us to identify and move past our temptations is to fast. When we fast, we deprive ourselves of something we

enjoy so that we can pay attention to what is going on inside. We learn from our cravings and temptations and develop the spiritual muscles to resist them.

We are called to enter into our own wilderness time, to undertake whatever fasts that we find helpful, in order to help us identify the kinds of temptations the tempter places before us. Resisting the temptations in our lives is a lifelong quest, of course, but identifying them clearly as temptations is the first step. It is only by bringing them into consciousness and naming them as temptations that we are given power to resist them. In order to say Yes to God, we must first say No to the voice of the tempter.

But once they have been named, it can be very helpful to identify the true longing behind them. Our temptations often spring from a genuine need or desire. The author Veronica Chambers writes that “When I examine my envy [of other women], I often discover that it’s not about the other person—it’s about me and what I feel my life is lacking. Envy is information, and holding my envy up to the light is like looking through a microscope at my heart. It shows me what my secret desires are. And I can use that knowledge to become the person I want to be.” [“Taming Envy,” *The Oprah Magazine*, November 2000, p. 104]

Just as the addict longs for paradise, or the person dealing with sexual temptation longs for intimacy, our temptations can be clues to what is missing in our lives, clues to needs and hungers that sometimes only God can fill. But if we are to allow God to fill those needs, we must resist the false pursuit of other ways of filling them. In order to say Yes to God, we must first say No to the voice of the Tempter. Let us pray:

O Ancient Love,
Not by magic,
but through the generosity of your people,
do stones become bread.
Not by gathering power to ourselves,
but through serving others,
do we find our lives fulfilled and given meaning.
Not by spectacular acts,
but through trusting and risking,
do we live faithfully.
Thank you, Ancient Love,
for these wilderness lessons. Amen!