

Facing Up To Temptation

Matthew 4: 1-11

(First Sunday in Lent – February 10, 2008)

Searching the aisles of the hardware store the other day for a tube of “Super Glue,” I couldn’t find it, so I went up to what I thought was the customer service desk to ask for help from a young man standing at the cash register. He was on his cell phone, and, when he saw me coming his direction, he turned his back toward me. I could tell he was making a personal call, but I just waited. The call went on and on”So did you like the movie?... really? ...Oh, you’re kidding!... What did Susan say?...” Finally I cleared my throat. He gave a sharp glance in my direction and kept on talking. “That Susan’s a flirt... Oh, I know, I hate that...So you going to the game Friday?...”

I was beginning to be impatient: “Pardon me,” I said, “I just need to ask one question.”

He let out a great sigh and mumbled into the phone, “Catch ya’ later, I gotta go.” He looked at me with an exasperated expression that said, “Well, spit it out.”

“I’m looking for “Super Glue.”

“It’s on the third aisle, in plain view,” he said with disdain. As I walked down that aisle, the further I went the angrier I got. How dare he treat me, a customer, so rudely? I was tempted to go back there and give him a piece of my mind!”

I was tempted...what does that mean?

Talking to our friend Marj some years back in a church I served in Iowa, she said that Don (that’s her husband) wanted to schedule a mid-winter trip to the Virgin Islands. He’s got enough flier miles to take me with him and it surely would be nice to have a few days away from the cold and the routine. But our kids have school, and we’d have to leave them at home by themselves. With all the parties we’ve been hearing about when parents are out of town....well, we trust them, but I hesitate to put them under that kind of temptation.”

“I hesitate to put them under that kind of temptation...what does that mean?”

The fellow next to me on the plane some time back was reading USA Today. “Well, there she is,” he said, pushing the paper under my nose, making sure I saw the photo of the attractive young woman model. “Who’s that?” I asked. “Who is that? That’s Kathy Ireland...you know...the cover girl for Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issue.” “You going to buy a copy?” He chuckled lecherously. “I’m tempted.”

“I’m tempted...what does that mean?”

Most of us think that if there is one thing we know about in life, it's temptation. If there's one theological word that doesn't need to be rescued from abstraction, that connects firmly and vividly to our everyday experience, "Temptation" would be the one. We face temptation all the time. We're tempted to break our diets, flirt with somebody at work, finesse the chemistry test, cheat on our taxes, gossip about a friend, lie our way out of trouble ...you name it. We're always being tempted to do what we know we shouldn't do. We don't need any instruction about temptation. Temptation we know about.

But, do we really? Do we really know what temptation is? Today's lesson from the Gospel of Matthew is a story about the nature of human temptation – Jesus' temptation and ours -- and it throws a surprising light on what temptation really is. It is always the lesson for the First Sunday in Lent.

What does it mean, really, to be tempted?

Some years ago now, one of the books of the best-seller list was the cleverly titled, All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. In that book, author Robert Fulghum says that the deepest wisdom he knows about life was learned not at the top of a graduate-school mountain but in the kindergarten classroom and in the sandbox playing with other children. Wisdom like: Share everything; play fair; clean up your own mess; say you're sorry when you hurt somebody; don't hit people; when you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together."

Well, if Robert Fulghum got his deepest wisdom about ordinary life in kindergarten, perhaps the best place to search for wisdom about the life of faith, about a theological concept like temptation, can be found in Sunday school. Maybe all we really need to know about temptation we learned in Sunday school. Trying to remember what we learned in Sunday school may, however, be a stretch.

Frankly, I can't remember very much, but one pertinent comment did come back. Our church school teacher told us one Sunday, "The best measure of a person is what you would do if you knew no one would ever find out." Recalling that remark now, it strikes me more like general worldly wisdom than Christian wisdom, because our teacher was telling us that, when you take away all the lust for reward and all the fear of punishment – no one will ever find out – what you do in life grows out of who you understand yourself to be. In other words, our Sunday school teacher was moving toward a profound gospel insight: Christian ethics grow

out of Christian identity; the decisions we make in life are a product of who we understand ourselves to be.

In that light, we have a far too shallow view of temptation. In ordinary terms, we think of temptation as the urge to do something we really would like to do but know we shouldn't do – one more cigarette, one more fling, one more drink, one more juicy rumor. But the deepest temptation isn't the urge to misbehave, to do what we know we shouldn't do, but rather the enticement to compromise our baptismal identity, to be who we are not called to be.

That's the message in this story of Jesus' temptation. The devil isn't tempting Jesus to misbehave. He isn't tempting Jesus to steal a wallet, or sneak a peek at porn, or cheat on his taxes, or pick a fight with his neighbor. It's deeper than that. The devil in this story is tempting Jesus to ignore his baptism, to deny who he is, to forget that he is the child of God.

It's significant that Jesus comes to the temptation immediately from his baptism, when, as the Gospel has it, the skies opened and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That's who he is. "This is my Son. You are the heir to the identity and mission of my people. You are a prophet, a priest, an anointed One, a servant to the people. And then of course the Gospel leads us through to the painful road to Jerusalem and the cross and then Easter. "You are the One." This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

It is, then, when Jesus' vocation and identity are most clear that he comes to the season of his tempting. It is precisely Jesus' identity that the Gospel writer has the devil seek to destroy. That, after all, is what temptation is all about. Notice how the tempter begins, "If you are the son of God..." He could have attacked directly, "You are not the Son of God," but the Gospel writer has the tempter too crafty for that. Much better to generate self-doubt -- "If you are the Son of God" -- since self-doubt is the cancer that eats away at identity.

How many of us have done this – I remember an argument with one of my daughters, one of those stormy father-daughter arguments. It blew over quickly, resolving itself in understanding. But at the height of it I remember saying, "Now you listen to me! If you are my daughter you...." If you are my daughter – flesh of flesh, heart of my heart. I could hardly have used words more destructive than to raise doubts about her identity.

So the author of this Gospel has the devil pick away at Jesus' sonship, at his baptismal identity. The three temptations – to turn stones into bread, to throw himself down from the top of the temple and to worship the tempter -- aren't enticements to do bad things; they are,

at root, invitations to be somebody else, to live some life other than that of the beloved Son of God.

Everything about the early chapters of Matthew -- from the genealogy that opens the Gospel to the account of Jesus' baptism -- makes it plain that Jesus has been given a narrative, a storied identity. The devil wants him to change the script, to trade his story for some other story. Notice that Jesus combats the attack not with theological innovation, skillful counter-arguments, or clever repartee, but by citing the story, quoting each time scriptures from Deuteronomy that he was taught as a child. In other words, Jesus quotes the holy script of his time. He will not change it; he will not live narrative other than the one he's been given; he remembers his baptism, and he knows who he is.

Because we call ourselves Christians, we, too, have been given a part in the story, a role to play in this holy drama of redemption. We have been called, called in our baptism to be God's beloved children. In a world where might makes right, we have been named ambassadors of reconciliation. It is our baptismal identity to be those who sow love where there is hatred, hope where there is despair, faith where there is doubt.

Because we are called, we are also tempted, tempted to change the script, tempted to live out another story, tempted to be someone other than who we are called to be. To yield to temptation is far more serious than to commit some transgression; to yield to temptation is to say, "I am not a child of God, and I will not take my part in the ongoing drama of living out the Great Commission.

In the midst of South Africa's struggle against apartheid, one of the most respected voices for racial harmony and human dignity was that of Bishop Desmond Tutu. But even the closest colleagues of Tutu were sometimes distressed by the Bishops's tolerance and moderation. They wished he would have been more aggressive with his opponents. One of them said, "At his age you'd think he would have learned to hate a little more." But there is this problem with Tutu; he believes literally in the gospel."

My junior year in high school I had a part in the class play. I also helped the sound effects person. When the script called for knocking on the door, I rapped two sticks together. When the phone was supposed to ring, I touched the wires together on the battery-operated bell, watching carefully so that I would stop just as the actor picked up the receiver.

We worked hard on that play. The director was a woman who taught English at the school, a new addition to the faculty, and she poured herself into the play. She coached us on our

lines and helped us to get our timing right. She would then dash to get some food, returning in the evening for rehearsals, working with us on the props and pitching in on the painting of the sets. Unselfishly she gave herself to this moment in our lives.

Night after night we rehearsed, and on opening night we were ready. The curtain opened and the house was packed with family and friends. The first act was a dream. The play was comedy, and every funny line evoked rich laughter from the audience. But in the second act, an actor forgot his lines. You could see in his face that he knew it was his turn to speak, but he couldn't find the words. The audience didn't sense it yet, but the others of us off-stage did.

What to do? Everybody was paralyzed as this unfortunate classmate squirmed and tried to remember. I was standing in the wings, next to the teacher/director. She was leaning toward the stage, every ounce of energy aimed encouragingly toward that struggling kid.

The script in her hand, she was just about to whisper his line out to him, when suddenly he spoke. It wasn't the line in the script -- in his anxiety, he just made something up -- but he spoke. Not only that, what he said happened to be funny, and the audience roared with laughter.

Everybody on stage relaxed; they had gotten past a bad spot and could now work past it. Unfortunately, though, the forgetful actor heard the laughter of the audience and liked it, so he made up another line. This, too, was funny...not as funny as the first line, but the audience chuckled.

The other actors were trying to respond to him, but they couldn't. I don't remember how we got out of it. The memory that sticks in my mind, though, is looking up to see the director, the woman who gave so much of her time to work with us and make us ready, who had poured herself into the play for our benefit, standing in the wings, watching and cringing.

Jesus was cast, by his own choice, into the lead role of this drama of God's redemption, and the devil in the story tempted him to change the script, to improvise on the character, deny who he was called to be. But Jesus knew who he was and he trusted that script and he never changed it. "It is written...It is written... It was said of old...but I say to you...Like Jesus, we who are a part of the church have been baptized, and the words have been said to us, "You are a son of God...you are a daughter of God." We, too, have been given our parts to play in this drama of God's redemption." "Seek first the kingdom of God, pray without ceasing, repay no one evil for evil, feed my lambs, bear one another's burdens, be kind to one another, forgive one another, love your enemies, be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." Even

now the tempter whispers in your ear, change the script, make up your own lines. Everything is at stake, and the one who has poured his life into preparing us is watching.