

sermon-2/10/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Putting First Things First”
Matt. 4:1-11

It’s the first Sunday in Lent and the lectionary gives us the temptations of Jesus. That’s not a bad place to start as we enter Lent. Isn’t Lent all about discipline, about working on our inner life so we can grow into mature Christians. Why not start by looking at temptation?

The trouble is, we often trivialize this text in Matthew and our own dealing with temptations. We reduce this important subject to not being tempted into doing bad things. By “bad things” we usually mean sex, drugs, gluttony, even just overeating, or any other behavior for which we feel ashamed.

When we reduce temptation to all those bad things that tempt us, we end up dealing with temptation on a very surface level. We miss the complexity this biblical passage presents to us. We misunderstand the challenges the Gospel wants us to consider. Let’s turn to those gospels now.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all talk about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness right at the beginning of his ministry. Commentators have spent much time trying to understand the significance of these temptations. Let’s listen into some of what they have to say.

First, biblical temptation is not about weakness and our trying to develop enough discipline to avoid falling into the traps our weaknesses create for us. No, they say, biblical temptation is more about our strengths. The greater the strengths we have, the greater the temptation will be to use those strengths in the wrong way. This is especially clear in Jesus’ case, as we shall see.

Second, biblical temptations are much deeper and more complicated than the temptation to break some laundry list of morals. To reduce temptation to simple moral issues like the ones I talked about at the beginning of this sermon, is to miss the power and drama of what is going on here in Matthew 4. It is also to miss the deeper challenges we all face in our journey of faith.

With all that in mind, let’s jump into the text. Cain Felder, one of the professors at Princeton when I attended that seminary, has a very interesting take on the three temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. He says they are especially relevant to religious folks, to people who attend church, people who call themselves followers of Jesus. Felder believes the temptations that confront Christians are all about seeing religion in the usual, tired old ways. The Kingdom of God Jesus came proclaiming urges us to move beyond old ways of thinking about our religion.

Specifically he says religion as usual is about “feeling good,” “feeling right,” and “feeling secure.” Feeling good is about “self-absorption, a kind of religious self-gratification.” It is about God being so concerned about our comfort that God wants to

meet all our needs, and meet them when we want those needs met. After all, we are the center of the universe, are we not?

Feeling right is about “self-righteousness and dogmatism; the delusion is that God has given one all the answers.” We have all seen this in some of those we call fundamentalists. Those of us who are more progressive in our theology are not immune from this self-righteousness. Whenever any of us who call ourselves religious claim to have a corner on the truth, beware! The Kingdom of God is more about trusting a great Mystery than it is about knowing all the facts.

Feeling secure is about “authority and power; the delusion is that being religious gives one the right to dictate to others.” It always seems to get down to power, does it not? The temptation to seek power because we know what is best for ourselves and others is a huge temptation. Beware of those unafraid of being corrupted by power.

We can see much of this in Jesus’ temptations. Turning the stones into bread would certainly make him feel good after his long fast. Matthew says Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and then he was famished. That has got to be one of the biggest understatements in all the gospels! Turning the stones into bread must have been a huge temptation. He could feed himself and others, helping them feel good as well.

Accepting Satan’s offer to have power over all the kingdoms of the world would make Jesus feel secure and invulnerable. He could use that power to make the world better and safer. He could be a benign dictator, doing what is best for the poor and disenfranchised. He could avoid any trouble he might have with Rome. The throne of power feels a whole lot better than the cross of sacrifice. The temptation to power is very seductive.

Herb O’Driscoll has a completely different take on these temptations. He says they are all about politics. Turning the stones into bread would allow Jesus to feed the hungry in his day. He would become very popular. That, says O’Driscoll, is the politics of bribery. This kind of politics is about giving people what they want so they will follow you.

Jumping from the pinnacle of the Temple and having God’s angels save him before he hits the ground is all about the politics of image. Jesus could certainly impress people by doing some miracle like that. Beware of anyone who cares more about image than truth.

Finally, accepting Satan’s offer to worship him so that he could have authority over all the kingdoms of the world is all about the politics of power. We can certainly see the idolatry behind such desires for power. We have seen vivid examples of that kind of politics in our own day. Such power inevitably corrupts.

Those interpretations on the temptations give us much to ponder. The bottom line in this complex discussion is identity. We need to figure out who we are and whose we are in order to live our lives with integrity, in order not to give into temptation. If you look carefully at Matthew’s gospel, he makes this very clear.

Jesus has just gone through his own baptism. He had an extremely powerful spiritual experience at that baptism where he hears a voice calling him God's Beloved Son. Now he has to figure out what that means. He has to decide how he is going to live that out. He heads into the wilderness, the place of testing, the place where identities are forged, the place, as one commentator put it, of self doubt.

The first thing Satan says to him is, "If you are the Son of God. . ." It is as if Satan is saying to Jesus, "You had this spiritual experience forming your identity. Was it real? Did you hear God right? What if it was only your imagination? If you truly are the Son of God, prove it. Do some miracles. Feed yourself and others. Impress people so they will follow you."

Notice Satan quotes scripture at Jesus. He says, "For it is written," and then Satan goes on to quote Psalm 91. Even scripture can tempt us to do the wrong thing if we are not secure in our identity as a child of God.

Basically Satan wants Jesus to prove his identity by doing something. But, our identity at its deepest level is not about what we do. It is something that is given to us by God. We do not need to prove our identity by doing anything. We do not earn our identity by achieving, by being successful, by making others like us, by impressing people with our fine qualities, or making others feel good. Our identity is a gift from God we can only live into when we avoid all that tempts us to be someone else.

I want to close with one other observation. One commentary I consulted said something remarkable that has stuck with me. It was concerning the second temptation where Jesus is urged to tempt fate by letting God miraculously save him from being hurt. The authors write that Jesus is a model for us showing us to be a Christian "means to have a trusting relation to God that does not ask for miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic human life."

Being human is partly about accepting our limitations. We will never have 100% certainty about anything we believe or think is right. We can never fully make ourselves secure and invulnerable. Trying to do so can lead to horrible abuses. We are always vulnerable to some heartache or tragedy and no power we could ever achieve will change that fact.

When we avoid the temptation to be something other than what God created us to be we will find our lives. When we allow Jesus to be our role model in this wilderness we all find ourselves in, we will know the joy of God's presence no matter what comes our way. When we put first things first, when we give priority to our God-given identity, and let all else take a lesser, more realistic place in our lives, we will truly be a mature disciple of Jesus. Lent is the time each year we are given to put first things first. If we can do that, everything else will take care of itself. May your Lent be about doing just that. Amen