

Lent 1, Year C
Luke 4:1-13
February 21, 2010

Temptations are an important part of human experience; they are one means by which we test our limitations, discover who we really are, and see for ourselves how close who we really are is to what we think we are. Indeed, an adult who experienced no sense of temptation whatsoever would be most worrisome, for that would be a person so opaque to himself as to be sociopathic. For temptation is in its essence the experience of an internal conflict between what we believe we ought to be thinking and doing, and what we might perhaps like to do, want to do, would do or think, were we uninhibited by prior convictions, perspectives and attitudes.

An infant in a grocery store with her parents might well grab a grape or a carrot and begin to eat it. Without any concept either of money or of stealing, it never occurs to her that she may not take what she wants. There is in this case no temptation whatsoever, since there is no conflict between what is right or proper or legal and what she desires, because she is not yet capable of internalizing the kinds of values that would create a sense of conflict and thus temptation in her. As adults we might be embarrassed when our tiny children do such things, but we don't worry about larger implications or begin to believe that our children are somehow kleptomaniacs.

An adult however has had plenty of time to internalize those values, and to fail to do so is a bad sign, not a good one. An adult who takes something from the grocery store without paying for it is stealing, and people who steal without any sense of internal conflict over that action, are unhealthy and need treatment.

The same is true of attitudes and perspectives. Not just as Christians, but as human beings we have learned of the value of love, forgiveness, compassion and justice. We have been raised to understand how important these values are, how vital they are to the smooth and proper functioning of society and personal relationships. An unhealthy person who becomes aware of some undeserved bit of good fortune in another might well become very envious or even jealous, and believe that such an attitude is exactly the right response, might even feel good about having those negative feelings. On the other hand a healthy person who becomes aware of some undeserved bit of good fortune in another might well experience an internal conflict between what she wants to do – become very envious, perhaps even jealous – and what her values and perspectives tell her is a better attitude – let it go, not your issue. That is the experience of temptation, and temptation won't arise unless those higher values and perspectives are already in place, already predisposing the person to a particular attitude about the world in the first place.

The experience of temptation therefore, in my view, is good. Though there are obviously unhealthy manifestations of temptation, as when a person gets thrown into a panic because of the “temptation” to hang up on a

telemarketer without being really nice about it, on the whole the experience of temptation is an important sign that our lives have been creatively shaped by healthy values and good priorities. The issue therefore is not how to structure our lives in such a way as to never experience temptation, and certainly the issue is not whether we ought to be considering ourselves to be bad people because we experience temptation. It is impossible for healthy people to avoid temptation, and the experience of it is a sign that we are good people, with real values and real consciences, not bad people who ought to know better. The issue rather is how to understand what is going on in the face of temptation, and what is it that leads us both to resist and to succumb to it. To understand that is to begin to see how Jesus was able to resist temptation, and thus to gain some insight into how we might become more like him.

As I see it, and I am not a psychologist, the principle reason people succumb to temptation is because they are insufficiently grounded in and dedicated to, the perspective and attitudes that gave rise to the internal conflict that characterizes temptation in the first place. The person who sees an ipod and wants it, but knows that to take it would be stealing, is in a state of temptation. *If* he is sufficiently grounded in the values of respect for the property of other people, *and* able to empathize enough with the person from whom he would steal the ipod to realize how he himself would feel if some of his property were stolen, *then* he won't steal it. If he is very highly grounded in such values and empathy then the struggle will be fleeting and the conflict minimal. If he is

perfectly grounded in those values he will admire the ipod, and may even consider whether he has the resources to buy one for himself, but the idea of stealing it will be at fleeting and perhaps no more than a flinch of the mind. But if he is not well grounded at all in those values, and has little ability to empathize, he will likely steal the ipod, or at least try to.

The same is true with emotional or affective temptations. If we are highly grounded in our own values of forgiveness and compassion, particularly if we are so highly grounded that we can freely forgive ourselves, we will be tempted to envy, malice, and so forth, from time to time, but we will not succumb to those temptations, or at least not for long. If however we are not highly grounded, and again particularly if we are unable to forgive ourselves, then we will from time to time succumb to such temptations, and find our lives marked by emotions and attitudes that are simply not good for us.

What we see in Jesus is a person who was perfectly, completely grounded in the highest value of all. He was altogether grounded in God. Because he was so highly grounded he was aware of all the possible temptations that beset people, symbolized in our story today by three examples. I don't much like speculating about Jesus, because we really don't know, but very likely he experienced as temptations things that we don't, precisely because we are not so highly grounded as was he. I, for example, don't ordinarily experience my periodic sense that my life is fairly pointless as a temptation; I just imagine that is the way things are. Because he was so much more highly grounded in God than

am I, Jesus would have understood that as a temptation, as a perspective he could succumb to, or not.

So because he was so grounded he had a greater experience of temptation than we do, but also because he was so grounded he was able to say “No” to every one of them; for the sake of his fidelity to God, from his perspective rooted in God’s love for him and for the world, he was able to overcome it all. Today’s passage in St. Luke, like the similar passage in St. Matthew, is a wonderful way of symbolizing that struggle, and its’ cost, and the results of his triumph.

From the perspective of his complete and full humanity I have to believe at least theoretically that what was possible for him is possible for us, but the fact is I don’t like our practical chances. I do on the other hand believe that we can look at Jesus for an understanding of what it takes to overcome the kinds of temptations that we all face. We don’t need more will power. We don’t need more “can do spirit.” We certainly don’t need to beat ourselves up over our failures, telling ourselves if only we were ‘better people” none of this would have happened. What we need is to become ever more grounded in God, ever more grounded in the perspective of compassion, love, and justice that characterizes all that we know of God. What we need is not first more “strength of character,” though that is a good thing. What we need is more trust, for out of our trust in God will come the strength of character that will enable us both to identify temptation accurately and resist its blandishments completely. Such a life, such a grounding, will come with a cost. It will make us ever more aware of just how

many ways there are to abandon that love, that compassion, that justice for the sake of something less, and so bring into our lives, at least for a while more internal conflict than we have previously experienced. But it comes with a promise as well, that we will overcome, that will find in our spirits what Jesus found in his, the gift and power of obedience, of faith, of fidelity to God that frees us all to live as we truly want to live, and so to become what we were truly meant to be, children of God, and heirs of the kingdom.