

Bodily Temptations

Preached FCCW, March 10, 2019 Lent 1C

Luke 4:1-13

It's not what it sounds like. The sermon title I mean. Whether this comes as a relief or a letdown, you're not about to hear a racy message about temptations of the flesh.

The Apostle Paul often referred to the Church as the Body of Christ. It's the temptations that we face as part of that Body – as a community of believers – that we'll be looking at this morning.

We typically relate the temptations of Jesus to our own personal struggles with temptation. But those individual temptations also have their corresponding counterparts in temptations facing faith *communities*. And, Jesus' responses to his temptations model for us the ways that Jesus' Body on earth can respond to the temptations that we face.

All temptations, whether individual or corporate, are in essence crises of identity. The devil prefaced his temptations to Jesus by saying “*if* you are the Son of God” then you should be able to do this, that or the other thing the devil wanted him to do. The diabolically clever thing about these temptations was that the devil didn't ask Jesus to do anything that was blatantly corrupt or evil. He didn't tempt Jesus to lie, cheat or steal. Each temptation only consisted of offering a shortcut to accomplishing something worthwhile. You could say that they actually made good common sense.

The trouble was those seemingly innocent shortcuts tempted Jesus to trust *someone* other than God; or *something* other than God's way of accomplishing those objectives. So, to each temptation Jesus responded by choosing God, and God's way. In doing that, he was ultimately being true to his identity as God's Son.

Like Jesus, the Body of Christ can find itself in a wilderness place of testing and temptation. The allure of these kinds of Bodily temptations is that while on the surface they seem to offer practical and expedient solutions to problems that plague churches, they also create diversions from the Church's primary mission and identity; and erode our trust in God's vision for what it means to be faithful disciples of Jesus.

Jesus' first temptation was to turn stones into bread when he was hungry from fasting in the wilderness. His answer was to quote the scripture that says, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." The purpose of his solitude and fasting was to be better attuned to God's will for him and to be fed by God's Word. Accommodating his bodily hunger by turning stones to bread, though seemingly harmless, actually signified putting physical ease before faithfulness to a higher purpose.

The first temptation of churches is often accommodation to a culture of comfort versus the necessary sacrifices that come with discipleship. Confronted with the modern reality that people have more choices than ever about how to spend their time and energy outside the Church, the temptation is to downplay the expectations that are found inside the Church.

One thing about Jesus is that he never sugarcoated his message when he was recruiting disciples. Jesus was very clear that becoming a disciple of his would bring the greatest of rewards--but that it would also involve serious commitment and personal sacrifice.

Churches succumb to the temptation to turn stones into bread when they live by a creed of "cheap grace" which promotes low levels of commitment over high expectations of the spiritual rewards of discipleship, for fear of not attracting—or even losing--members.

The second temptation that the devil placed before Jesus was a promise to grant Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world *if* he would just bow down and worship him. Jesus's response to this temptation was to quote the scripture that says, "You shall worship the Lord your God alone."

Jesus knew that the ends do not justify the means. That gaining the whole world at the cost of the integrity of your soul is no kind of a bargain.

It's a lesson that Jesus' Church Body is tempted to forget. There are mega-churches with sanctuaries the size of auditoriums, membership measured in thousands and a media presence that spans the globe...but which resemble corporations more than faith communities. The second Bodily temptation--one that strikes churches of all sizes--is to pursue institutional success while compromising the integrity of its witness and mission. There's an important distinction between applying responsible business principles to how the Church manages itself; and saying that the Church *is a business*. A business exists to make profits. The Church exists to make disciples of Jesus.

The Devil's third temptation was a dare. The Devil dared Jesus to hurl himself from the highest point on the temple in order to prove to everyone, once and for all, that he was the Son of God. Surely God would not let harm come to him, but would catch him safely in some angelic safety net before he hit the ground.

This time Jesus quoted the scriptures where it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus refused the devil's dare. But not because he lacked enough faith in God to put himself at risk. In fact, Jesus would soon take a much greater risk, when he totally trusted his life to God as he went to the cross.

Churches tend to test God, not by taking risks in a good cause and trusting God to preserve them; but by shying away from the risks inherent in standing for Kingdom values of peace, justice and mercy.

Even though Jesus didn't let the fear of controversy or rejection keep him from speaking out for people nobody else cared about, his Church Body is sometimes timid about taking stands that might be controversial; or speaking out for those who can't speak for themselves. When the assurance that God will be with us isn't as strong as the fear of the

consequences that may follow bold witness and action, the Body of Christ is tempted to *not* take a leap of faith.

Just because Jesus had won the battle against his temptations, that didn't mean that the war for his soul was over. Luke says that the devil departed from him *until an opportune time*. Temptation knows no season. It can come at any time.

Which is why Lent is no less important for the soul of faith communities than it is for the souls of faithful individuals. The fasts we make and the disciplines we practice during Lent are more than private matters. At their best they reinforce our sense of *who* we are, *whose* we are and *what* we are here for; so that we are better equipped to resist the temptations that typically bedevil the Body of Christ.

Which may have something to do with the fact that the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray, moves right from a petition to be spared from temptation and delivered from evil to the affirmation, "*for thine is the kingdom the power and the glory.*"

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