

## **“Temptations for the Church”**

**Luke 4:1-13**

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We live in a challenging time for the church. It's not just that many churches have struggled with declining numbers, the church as a whole has struggled. For the past 50 years the percentage of Americans who are in church on any given Sunday has been declining at a rate of about 2% per year. By 2010, that number had dropped to 17% and it continues to drop. The percentage of Americans who say they are in church is higher, 40-47% in that same year. But the actual number is much lower. There are individual church exceptions – mostly very large and very small churches - but the total percentage continues to decline.

Recent publicity about the coverup of sexual abuse not only in the Roman Catholic Church but among Southern Baptists and many others certainly doesn't help. Nor does the manner in which the vast majority of evangelicals have wed themselves unreflectively to one political party. But the rapid pace of change coupled with the church's struggle to remain relevant while retaining its essential character (note the UMC's vote this week) has been enough to provoke great concern.

In such a time the church is tempted to do whatever it takes to stabilize the ship. Desperate times call for desperate measures. The trouble is not only do we risk losing our souls in the process of accommodation, we may lose our best chance at survival. Churches that are doing well now and will have a bright future are those which have a clear sense of who they are and live out of their identity with conviction.

Today's reading from Luke seems helpful as we consider these concerns and appropriate as we celebrate 207 years of ministry. It is the traditional Lent 1 story about Jesus' temptations. It presents one moving image of Jesus among many we will consider this Lent. But these are not garden-variety temptations. They are temptations that concern Jesus' character and identity which inform our personal struggles with temptation, but also provide insight into temptations we face as a church.

The first scene takes place in the wilderness. It is a place with hot days and cold nights, a place with sharp winds that will cut right through you, even if you have a full stomach. But Jesus doesn't have a full stomach. He has not eaten for forty days. He is not hungry, he is famished! Knowing this, the devil comes strolling along and challenges Jesus at the very point where he is most vulnerable. "If you are the Son of God," he says, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

There is no need to contact Grubhub. Jesus is the Son of God. Even the crafty archdemon understands this. "If you are..." or perhaps better translated, "Since you are..." There is no dispute about the fact that Jesus is God's Son. The only question is as to what kind of Son. "Since you are the Son of God and you are hungry, you can use your power to create what you need most right now. You could create bread out of nothing or out of these stones. What would be wrong with that? Go ahead, Jesus, God knows you need to eat, son, go ahead!"

But Jesus refuses. "It is written," he says, "'One does not live by bread alone.'" He quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 but seems to have in mind the larger context of Deuteronomy 8 which alludes to Israel's exodus from Egypt, a time when bread comes down from heaven and water comes from stones, but also a time when Israel learns the hard way that there are things they need more than food and water. They need to trust that God will provide for their needs. Jesus also needs bread, but it is not his greatest need, and he trusts God to care for him. So, he refuses to give in to this temptation in the wilderness and throughout his ministry.

Jesus feeds the five thousand, gives sight to the blind, helps lepers. But the temptation is not simply to meet physical needs but to use power selfishly and focus only on immediate needs and measurable actions. Throughout his ministry Jesus refuses to use power selfishly and while he addresses immediate needs and does things that can be measured, he also addresses deeper needs for companionship and community, for purpose and meaning, for salvation, things that cannot be measured.

One implication for us in this part of the story is that we too may be tempted to address only immediate needs. The Luke 4 account of Jesus' first sermon makes clear the fact that he doesn't separate the physical, emotional and spiritual. He comes to preach good news and

deliver the oppressed, to give sight to the blind and proclaim the year of God's favor. His approach is holistic and everything he does for people is a part of the work of salvation. He doesn't feed and heal people just so that he can talk about eternal life with them.

But he does talk about eternal life and so should we. It is tempting to offer an array of social ministries and sensitive pastoral care and think we have done all we can. Talking about faith can be more challenging, but as Old Testament scholar Alberto Soggin, a man committed to social justice, asked a number of us in Louisville many years ago, if the church doesn't talk about eternity, who will? Many other organizations will do compassionate things. Only the church will talk about Jesus.

Another implication of this part of the story, though, is that we too may be tempted to focus on the measurable. Churches in this culture are obsessed with numbers, attendance and financial numbers. There is some valid concern, bills have to be paid and we do want to influence more people for good. But numbers can be misleading and the very idea that the most significant matters of faith can be measured is absurd. SWOT analysis has its place, but we cannot measure faith, hope or love.

One challenge for measuring today is that people are much more mobile and involved in so many other things that the same number of members in a church simply will not attend as often. A church would have to quadruple in membership to produce the same numbers. But even if this were not the case, numbers alone don't tell the whole story. Spiritual growth isn't always reflected in numbers and sometimes faithfulness reduces numbers. Churches engaged in racial reconciliation in the 1960's often struggled. Were they wrong? The closer Jesus got to the cross, the smaller the crowd following him was. Was he off-course?

Somehow we have to resist the temptation to give in to cultural measures of success. When asked how she continued her ministry among the poor, knowing that there would always be more poor people, Mother Teresa replied, "I wasn't called to be successful. I was only called to be faithful." That goes for all of us.

The second scene takes place at higher elevation. Luke says the devil takes Jesus up and shows him in an instant all the kingdoms of the

world and says to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I will give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” The devil offers Jesus authority, *exousia*, political power over all the kingdoms. The only catch is that Jesus must worship the devil.

Again Jesus refuses, saying, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:13, but again he has in mind a larger context which alludes to Israel’s experience wandering in the desert and being attracted to Canaanite gods. Travelling alone through a wilderness to an unfamiliar land, the children of Israel turn to other means of support. Jesus’ journey to the cross will be lonely too. He will be tempted to seek support from any means available. But he will resist temptation and give ultimate loyalty to God.

Like the first temptation, indeed like most temptations, this offer from the devil looks good on the surface. Think of the good Jesus could accomplish with authority over the kingdoms. Imagine what he could do with control over all the governments of the world – feed the hungry, cure the sick, build new roads, solve budget problems, bring world peace, take better care of the earth. It sounds better than any platform from either party! What would be wrong with this? Nothing, except what it would cost in the process, his allegiance to God, which was obviously too high a cost.

It is the temptation to allow the ends to justify the means and, in the process, to shift one’s ultimate loyalty. Ancient writers like Machiavelli and more recent ethicists like Joseph Fletcher have argued that as long as a goal is worthy, any means can be employed. For Jesus the means are as important as the end. This is why he says no to the devil in the wilderness. This is why he refuses to link arms with the Roman government to eradicate poverty. This is why he refuses to let his men fight the soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peace, food and freedom are lofty goals, but they are not to be obtained by force. The work of God’s realm is to be done by God’s rules.

One implication of this part of the story for us is that we may be tempted to allow the end to justify the means and thus employ methods contrary to the Gospel. When a pastor arrived at a large church, he told

them he could guarantee 200 new members a year. When another pastor asked him how he could make such a guarantee, since joining a church is a personal decision shaped by prayer and guided by the Spirit, he said, “I hire two outreach ministers and they each have two persons join every week.” Two persons times two ministers times fifty-two weeks...

“What happens if Sunday comes and the Spirit hasn’t moved and an outreach minister doesn’t have two new members?” the colleague asked, to which the pastor replied, “I had an outreach minister like that once.”

How we pursue noble goals is just as important as the goals themselves.

Another implication of this part of the story for us, though, is that we may be tempted to confuse our loyalties, especially if we become too deeply entwined with secular power. There is nothing wrong with the church speaking to issues of public concern like poverty, racism, sexism and immigration. In fact, we have a calling to do so. And there are times when we can partner very carefully with government entities to achieve a non-religious good. But to move beyond issues and carefully-chosen partnerships to blatant partisan support is not only a violation of the First Amendment, it is to give in to the very temptation Jesus resists.

Renowned African-American pastor Gardner Taylor once said that church and state are like boxers in a ring. They need a little distance so that each has punching room. Baptist Joint Committee leader James Dunn said that whenever the church and the state get into bed together, the church gets used. Indeed it does, but this is clearly a message many evangelical leaders in this time have not yet grasped.

The third scene takes place on the pinnacle of the temple. The devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the extreme top of the temple. There is an expectation that when the Messiah comes, he will assume this position. So, the devil takes Jesus there and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.” He even quotes scripture to make his point. He refers to a part of Psalm 91 which promises God’s protection for God’s chosen and he says, “Listen, Jesus, if anybody has ever been called, you have! Go on and jump, God will protect you!”

But alas, once again Jesus refuses. He recognizes the devil’s foolish challenge for what it is and again quotes Deuteronomy (6:16),

saying, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” He alludes to the time when the children of Israel test God again and again, saying, “Give us water... give us food... we had it better in Egypt, prove that you love us again...” But unlike Israel, Jesus refuses to test God in this way.

Not only in the wilderness but throughout his ministry Jesus refuses to test God by attempting the dramatic and showy. Time and again people say to him, “Show us a sign and we will believe,” but time and again he refuses. The reign of God is not about the spectacular, he says, it is about denying yourself, taking up your cross and following me. Not very showy, not very dramatic, but this is Jesus’ way.

It is a monumental temptation for the church. Desperate for numbers and confused about what they mean, church after church falls over itself to get people in the door. I told a story last week about a church in Richmond which brought a lion and a lamb into the church during Advent. There was a church in Illinois where a pastor lifted people with his teeth, with the aid of a special mouthpiece, until he tried to lift a 385-pound coal miner and lost five teeth. There is no length to which churches will go to attract a crowd and as the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes said, “Discourse on virtue and they pass by in droves. Whistle and dance the shimmy and you’ve got a crowd!”

The desire to connect with more people is a Gospel desire. But there are two problems with our obsession. First, what we have that is most attractive is the essence of the Gospel at work in our lives, our love for God and our neighbor. Second, the day of the attractional church is fading. That is, our primary movement needs to be beyond the walls of the church to where people are, not requiring people to come to us. As a colleague once said, “Jesus said, ‘Go ye,’ not ‘Y’all come!’”

It is a challenging time for the church, even a church with a heritage as rich as ours, but we are planted in the heart of a mission field and we have so many gifts. The key lies in remaining true to our identity and calling. Like Jesus, we will be tempted to become someone other than who we are. We need to be true to ourselves, remain loyal to God, focus on spiritual things and let our love for God and our neighbor be the most spectacular thing we do, and God will use us for good.