

A Power-full Temptation

[Text - Luke 4:1-13]

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This morning's ancient story of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness remains as relevant and intriguing today, as when it was first written. That's because it reminds us that - throughout history - the greatest temptation to those who seek to serve God, is the allure of power and control. The tempter says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, *command* this stone to become bread." [Come on, Jesus, not only could you satisfy your immediate hunger, you could potentially feed the entire world! No? Well how about this:] "I will give you the power of all the kingdoms of the world - which you could use for doing all kinds of good - if you'll just bend a bit and bow to me." [What, that's too morally compromising? O.K. here's a more pious plan:] "If you throw yourself from the top of the temple, the Holy Scriptures *guarantee* that God will send angels to catch you. Then the public will be captivated by you power and fame, and you can lead the masses in any moral direction you desire!"

How devilishly cunning each of these suggestions are! They present Jesus a way in which he could redirect his power and position [*just slightly*] in order to achieve a truly noble end. And who among us hasn't toyed with, or tried, the strategy of bending our ethics [*just slightly*] in order to get the advantage we need to deal with a complex problem? We, too, may even find a Scripture passage to help rationalize our decision. But here's the catch: just because something is found in Scripture, doesn't make it the definitive "Word of God!" There are Bible passages that advocate slavery, sexism, racism, and barbaric violence - including the annihilation of one's enemies, down to the last man, woman, child and animal! [I Samuel chapter 15!] It's not just from the Koran that you can pull-out atrocious passages; they're also in our own Bible - the part that would have been *Jesus'* "Bible"!

This is why, as Jesus is developing his understanding of what it means to be a faithful Child of the Holy One, he wrestles in the wilderness to determine which religious writings and practices he will respect and emphasize, and which ones he will reinterpret or completely reject. And while it would have been convenient for him to latch-onto those scriptures that encourage exercising authority and exerting power, Jesus unequivocally resists that temptation. No doubt he has seen his fair share of religious and political leaders who are far more interested in controlling and using people, rather than in helping and caring for them. Jesus knows how power and position can tempt and corrupt even those individuals who may begin with the best of intentions. So he steadfastly resolves that he will not give in to the temptation of power and domination

Instead, Jesus determines that he will humbly go-about doing good - by performing acts of kindness, compassion, and service. When he does tap-into that Divine power which conveys wholeness and healing, he often instructs people to tell no one. [He's restoring them for *their* benefit, not to boost his own ego.] And in those instances when the crowd tries to make Jesus their champion and king, he quietly slips away. For Jesus, being a genuine Child of God means that he will let *God* be God; and will trust that his life, and the lives of all those around him, are ultimately in the capable hands of our Compassionate Creator.

Believing that his Heavenly Parent loves him with an unshakable love, allows Jesus to let go of his own need for power or prestige, and to take-on the role of a humble and compassionate servant. And when that final temptation comes: to choose between facing death, or abandoning the message and mission of all-inclusive Divine Love, Jesus once again trusts in that never-ending Love. The Good News of our Faith, is that even when the forces of fear and death claim the life of Jesus, the greater power of Life and Love re-claim him - breaking the grip of death, and revealing the way to true and everlasting life for all people.

In every religious tradition - be it Christian or Jewish, Islamic or Buddhist, Hindu or Voodoo - there are people who are attracted by the allure of the personal power, or the spiritual superiority, which that faith-system can offer. These people focus on those few places in their sacred writings that emphasize domination and differences, judgement and condemnation - rather than those many that speak about compassion and unity, service and equality. They use their religious practice as an excuse to practice their own prejudices and hatreds; rather than a sacred pathway to tolerance, wholeness and peace. In every religion, there are people who give-in to the temptation of power; and there are those who surrender to the Divine Call for service and self-giving love. And as this duality can be found in all religions, a similar dichotomy - between the desire to control others, and the willingness to serve them - can be found in the hearts of all people - including you and me.

As a Pastor, much of my effort to carefully craft a sermon, or conduct a worship service, stems from my genuine desire to serve God - and you. Yet I'm also driven, in part, by my own need to feel that I'm in control of things; and from a hesitancy to trust completely in the Holy Spirit's Power and Presence. I truly believe everything I say about the *abundance* of Divine love, welcome, and grace; but I can also be unloving, uncharitable, and ungracious. When it comes to fully sharing my time, my resources, and my whole self with others, I find letting go of that control to be difficult. Even in the best of our relationships, most of us are tempted to hold-back a bit; to try to maintain an upper-hand; to protect our fragile and vulnerable selves. Yet the more we try to guard and hold on to our own lives, or sense of control, the more we actually lose.

This is why we must continually re-discover and remember those fundamental truths:

That it really is more blessed to give than to receive.

That being kind to others, truly is a kindness unto ourselves.

And that freely sharing our lives, really does set us free!

As you and I learn to trust in the absolute power of Divine Love, we will find the strength and courage to overcome any temptations that

come our way. We will joyfully claim and proclaim the Good News: That we are *all* God's beloved children! And as God's children, we will treat one another with patience and openness, compassion and respect. This is the path that Jesus chooses; this is the way that leads us - not into temptation - but into meaningful and everlasting life!