

The Powerful Allure of Power

[Texts - Genesis 2 and 3;
Matthew 4:1-11]

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At first glance, the temptations that Jesus faces in this mornings reading seem drastically different from the kind of temptations most of us face. As a young boy, I was once tempted to *throw* a stone through a window; but never to *turn* a stone into a loaf of bread. Taking a leap from the top of the temple doesn't tempt me in the least. In fact, climbing the ladder to put-up that purple draping, is as high as my "higher calling" is going to take me! And I've certainly never been shown the splendor of all the realms of the world, or been tempted by the power to rule them. Though come to think of it, lately I *have* considered how things might be better if I *were* in charge. So, while you and I may not desire to possess or rule the entire world, I imagine most of us *deeply* desire to control our own personal domains and destinies. The temptations of Jesus may indeed seem foreign to you and me; nevertheless, when we look at the underlying enticement *behind* those temptations, we can understand how they definitely relate to us today.

Throughout history, one of the greatest temptations to anyone who seeks to serve God, is the allure of power and control. And Jesus is no exception. The Tempter says to him, "If you are the Son of God, *command* this stone to become bread." [Come on, Jesus, not only could you satisfy your own immediate hunger, you could potentially feed the entire world! No? Well how about this:] "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!" [What, you find that too dramatic and manipulative? O.K. here's a more subtle plan:] "You can have the power of all the realms of the world - which you could use for doing all kinds of good - if you'll just bend a bit and bow to my less-than-scrupulous ways."

Each of these suggestions is devilishly cunning! They present Jesus a way in which he can 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?

In the wilderness, as Jesus is wrestling with his understanding of what it means to be a faithful Child of the Holy One, he strives to determine which religious principles he will respect and emphasize, and which ones he will reinterpret or reject. And while it would have been expedient for him to embrace those practices that encourage exercising authority and exerting power and control, Jesus resists that temptation. No doubt he has seen plenty of religious and political leaders who are far more interested in controlling and using people, rather than caring for and helping 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 and compassion, service and self-giving. When he does convey that Divine power which brings wholeness and healing, he often instructs people to tell no one. [He's restoring them for *their* benefit, not to boost his own ego or reputation.] And in those instances when the crowd tries to compel Jesus to become their champion and king, he quietly withdraws. For Jesus, being a genuine Child of the Holy One 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 care 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 and prestige - and to take-on the role of a humble 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 Divine Life and Love re-claim him - breaking the grip of death, and revealing the way to true and everlasting life for us all.

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 scriptures that emphasize judgement and condemnation, exclusion and domination. And they disregard those many texts 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 as a sacred pathway to peace and tolerance, hospitality and wholeness. 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 just as this duality can be found in all religions, a similar duality - 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.

This is why it's so important that we continually re-discover and re-claim these fundamental truths:

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

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

That the meek - not the mighty - shall inherit the earth.

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

The more you and I learn to trust in the absolute power of Divine Love, the more 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 children of the Holy One, we will treat one another in ways that are wholesome

and respectful, compassionate and caring. This is the path that Jesus chooses; this is the way that leads us - not into temptation - but into meaningful, fruitful, and everlasting life!