

The Gift of Temptation

A sermon in the 2016 Lenten worship series

“Gifts from the Dark Woods”

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- Romans 7:18b-20 ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.
- Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus’ refusal was curt: “Beat it, Satan!” He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.” (The Message, v.10)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Just because something is good to do does not mean that it is what God wants *us* to do.

In our Lenten series “Gifts of the Dark Woods” we’ve been considering how it is that when we feel our lives have entered a time of uncertainty, distress, confusion, anxiety – what Dante referred to as the “dark woods” periods of life – it’s in those uncertain, uncomfortable times that God may provide us with gifts that we might not otherwise notice. Based on the work of pastor Eric Elnes in his book Gifts of the Dark Wood: seven blessings for soulful skeptics (and other wanderers), in previous weeks we’ve considered how “uncertainty” could be a gift from God, or how “emptiness” could be a gift, how “being thunderstruck” or even “getting lost” could be gifts to awaken our senses to the presence of the Holy Spirit and give us glimpses into new possibilities for our lives.

But the gift we consider today might leave us scratching our heads: “the gift of *temptation*?” *Really?* But wait – when was the last time you were tempted to do something seriously evil? I’m not talking about being tempted to gossip about a neighbor or being tempted to eat an entire pint of Mitchell’s Chocolate Almond ice cream. I mean tempted, say, to do someone bodily harm.

I confess that occasionally I have a fantasy of causing bodily harm. When a vehicle suddenly veers in front of me and shoots across three lanes of traffic to catch an exit ramp, or the car I’m following suddenly slams on the brakes and turns without having bothered to raise a finger (literally!) to activate a turn signal... when I witness and am affected by those kinds of bone-headed, discourteous, and dangerous motorist behaviors, that’s when I’m tempted to press the button on the dashboard that activates the hood-mounted laser, immediately vaporizing the offending vehicle. I’m tempted... except I wouldn’t really want to hurt someone. Also, my car doesn’t have that button. (Yet.)

Maybe you’ve been tempted to throw your boss out the window. Or “permanently silence” an obnoxious neighborhood cat or dog. Or some other dire and dastardly act. But if you haven’t done it, or haven’t had more than brief fantasies of it, you probably aren’t really tempted to perpetrate great evil.

No, it’s more likely that the temptation you face most often is actually the temptation to do good. Yes, the temptation to do good. To help you see what that possibly could mean, let’s consider among the most famous instances of temptation: the temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness which we heard about from Matthew Chapter 4 this morning.

Mark’s gospel simply mentions that Jesus was tempted, and John’s gospel doesn’t mention the episode at all. But Matthew and Luke both describe the temptations in some detail, though in a different order. It occurred when Jesus was thirty years old and was preparing to begin a public ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. God’s Spirit guided Jesus to go on retreat in the wilderness to sort things out, to figure out how he was going to accomplish the work God meant for him to do. During this wilderness retreat Jesus experienced a time of testing, temptation. The biblical narrative personifies the experience in a character called Satan (that name comes from the Hebrew *ha-satan* meaning, “the Accuser”).

I never thought of this before, but it was pointed out to me that in each of the tests or temptations, the things Satan urged Jesus to do were not “bad” things:

- Turning stones into bread could have fed the multitude of impoverished people – feeding hungry people... that would be a good thing;
- While jumping off the pinnacle of the temple sounds dangerous, foolhardy and, well, stupid, Jesus would be demonstrating his faith in God's protection – showing such faith is a good thing;
- And being offered the chance to rule all the world with compassion and justice – that would be a good thing.

The so-called tests or temptations Jesus faced were not invitations to do harmful or evil things. Who would find fault with someone wanting to feed people, wanting to show trust, wanting to rule with compassion and justice? These were temptations to “do good.”

So why were they temptations? They were temptations because they were not what God wanted of Jesus. God wanted Jesus to gain disciples, but not through the “wrong good” of manipulation. God wanted Jesus to gather disciples through the “right good” of sincere, devotion-inspired faithfulness.

That can be true of us, too – we can be tempted to do good things... but they may be the “wrong good” – good things that are not what *we* are called to do.

So, how are we supposed to know? I mean, if the things that we're tempted to do are good, how can we turn our back on them? The author of the “Dark Woods” book admits that “The faculties people typically employ to discern these very things – logic, reason and strategy – tend to be surprisingly unhelpful in this regard. In fact, they often produce a long list of reasons we should stay on a path that is not our own and not make waves. Logic and reason will say, ‘Think of all the good you're doing working here! ...Think of all the people who rely on you.’”¹

Let me give you an example of the “wrong good.” By now you know that my family moved to Jakarta, Indonesia when I was in ninth grade. Indonesia is a wonderful place. Tropical. Beautiful. Lush. It's also predominantly impoverished and heavily populated. The island of Java where we lived is one of the most densely-populated places on earth, with nearly 40,000 people per square mile² (by comparison, congested, bustling New York City has about 27,000 people per square mile³). So there were people everywhere, including many men, and women, and children and youth living on the streets, begging for a living.

Mothers with infants slung around their necks, or emaciated, toothless old men, or school-aged children with sweet smiles and sweet eyes run up to you as you get out of your car. As you walk toward the market they go with you, surrounding you like the Secret Service. Hands outstretched, but almost never touching you, they say over and over, “*Kasih, kasih, kasih*” (“Thanks, thanks, thanks”) in hopes of receiving a handout worth just pennies. But you learn very quickly that you shouldn't give to the beggars. Would the money help them? Some of them, absolutely. Should *we* be the ones doing it? It sounds callous, harsh to say it, but No. It's not a “good” that we foreigners were called to do – not even the Christian missionaries among the expatriate community.

It's true downtown in Cleveland, too. Might we be tempted to give money to a homeless person shaking a cup? It might make us feel good, but it's the “wrong good.” Social workers and community organizers agree that giving a dollar to organizations like United Way or Salvation Army or City Mission or Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries or North Presbyterian Church would accomplish much broader and enduring good than spare change given to one person.

At one time this congregation divided its mission monies among fourteen different recipients. They were all worthy organizations, and we felt good because of all the good those organizations were doing in the community and in the world. It was tempting to continue supporting that many (or even more) organizations, sharing smaller and smaller amounts of money with each organization. Then one year our Mission Committee looked at that list and asked itself, “All these are worthy programs, but is this the good *we* are called to do? Or should we focus our support, giving more substantially to fewer

¹ Eric Elnes, *Gifts of the Dark Woods—seven blessings for soulful skeptics (and other wanderers)*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, 105.

² <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/indonesia-population/> accessed 3/10, 2016

³ <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/data-maps/nyc-population/population-facts.page>, accessed 3/10/2016

organizations?” The good we were tempted to do was to make Rocky River Presbyterian’s generosity known to many organizations. But then we realized that some of those worthy programs were not what we strongly felt called to support. As you’ll find in the Life of This Church announcements, our Mission Committee is going through another episode of such re-evaluation.

In a church far, far away from here, a talented and popular teacher was asked if she would join the volunteer staff as a Sunday school teacher. She was an outstanding teacher; she would have been good at teaching Sunday school. When she declined, her church couldn’t understand her respectful but firm answer of No. How could she possibly not want to do this good work for her church, and especially for the children of the church? But she sensed that for her it was the “wrong good.” She had no doubt that it was a worthy task. But she sensed that God was calling her to another good work. She sensed God calling her to become active in a community woman’s group because her abilities and energies would strengthen the group and would benefit its members.

Our temptation to do the “wrong good” can lead us away from the way God has in mind for us, even though we might not see a different way... yet.

Recently I spoke with someone who survived a life-threatening, traumatic experience. He told me that he emerged from this harrowing experience with a serene conviction that it had prepared him for *something*... but he doesn’t know yet what that something is. He can imagine any number of ways he could use his experience and talents for the benefit of any number of organizations and programs. But he’s taking his time discerning what his next step will be because he doesn’t want to succumb to the temptation to do the “wrong good” simply because it would be novel or glamorous or prestigious or popular or easy or fun. He wants to discern the path God beckons him to follow.

The “gift of temptation” can be helpful in discerning what God truly is calling us to do. Becoming aware that we can be tempted to do the “wrong good” reminds us that the path we’re on is not necessarily the path God intends for us, not necessarily the way God wants us to use our energies and interests and talents and spiritual strength. In his wilderness testing Jesus realized that though manipulating people would have been effective in gaining followers, that would have achieved a good end through an unhealthy means.

While it may be true in geometry that the shortest route between two points is a straight line, the path God intends for you is rarely that simple. Reason, logic and rationality can be helpful tools in certain situations, but when it comes to discerning how God wants you to go, “more often than not, your intuition—your deep listening to the voice of the Spirit—is a better judge than your logic, reason, or strategic ability.”⁴

So let’s be clear: I’m not encouraging you to abandon all of your good works, your charitable actions. Obviously, good works move us further on our path... if we are receptive to the quiet promptings of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Through hunches, hints, intuitions, longings, inspirations, the Holy Spirit gently nudges us, guiding us toward the path God intends.

When you recognize that the temptation to do good can be a gift, you see how it challenges you “to discern between the good you are called to do and the good you are specifically not called to do.”⁶ And the good you are called to do leads to the path God lays out before you.

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⁴ Elnes, 2015, 108.

⁵ Elnes, 2015, 103.

⁶ Elnes, 2015, 108.