

Temptation



THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 9, 2020

North Congregational Church

New Hartford, Connecticut

FOR YOUR MEDITATION

Free cheese is always available in mousetraps. -Anonymous

One great remedy against all manner of temptation, great or small, is to open the heart and lay bare its suggestion, likings and dislikings, before some spiritual adviser; for the first condition which the Evil One makes with a soul, when he wants to entrap it, is silence.

- St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622)

THE PEACE OF CHRIST

It is normally our custom when we gather to extend the Peace of Christ to one another. Even though we are physically apart at this time, may you know that peace.

INVITATION TO WORSHIP

Although we remain physically separated,
Let us gather together this day in mind and spirit,
Loved and claimed by God,
Followers of the teachings of Jesus,
Ever inspired and upheld by the Christ Spirit
to resist the temptations that lead to thoughts and actions that cause hurt or harm
but rather to only do good in the world.

MUSICAL INVITATION TO WORSHIP

What A Friend We Have in Jesus

Tune: CONVERSE

First Plymouth Church, Lincoln, Nebraska

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBdCwn2hKBs&feature=youtu.be>

SCRIPTURE LESSONS

Romans 7: 15-20.

I do not understand my own actions.

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I

hate.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is

good.

But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells

within me.

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in

my flesh.

I can will what is right, but I cannot do

it.

For I do not do the good I want, but the

evil I do not want is what I do.

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no

longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Luke 4:1-13

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,

2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.

7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,
10 for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’
11 and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

12 Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (275)

MORNING MESSAGE

“Lead Us Not...”

The Rev. Marcia Lynn Cox

By what are you tempted?

Cheesecake or a rich chocolate dessert?

Beautiful women...or handsome men?

Lots of money. Drugs, alcohol...? Shopping? Laziness?

How does it feel to be tempted and how do you react?

Six Sundays ago I had the privilege of considering the matter of prayer: what its purposes are, whether or not God grants us all of our needs and desires, how it changes us and what we might rightly ask. In order to consider that last question, I turned to the The Lord’s Prayer, the prayer according to the gospels of Matthew and Luke that Jesus taught, the prayer we say together at every worship service. So I thought it would be good this summer to reflect on the things that Jesus told us to ask for in that prayer. Four weeks ago we considered the phrase, “On earth as it is heaven,” and imagined what it would be like to bring heaven to earth. On the two weeks following, I examined the sentence, “Forgive us our sins (trespasses, debts) as we forgive those who sin against us,” offering some thoughts about the need for us to be both forgiven and forgiving. Then last week, a communion Sunday, I thought it would be particularly fitting to contemplate the petition, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Today and next Sunday, I will complete this summer series by meditating on the petitions, “Lead us not into temptation” and “Deliver us from evil.”

To understand “temptation,” I’d like to begin by consulting the dictionary. We all have a sense of what temptation is, but I’d like to be a little more specific. Noah Webster is my favorite, because he’s a son of West Hartford.

This is what he says. (To Tempt: Webster)

1. to rouse desire in; be inviting to; attract.

This is the job of marketers, advertisers, who spend their lives trying to entice us to buy things. Automobiles, vacations, diet remedies, new clothes.

If we succumb, we're not particularly immoral, but buying too many things can lead to debt and an over-abundance of unnecessary things clogging up our lives and our houses.

Here's a second, related definition of the word Tempt: "to try to persuade, induce or entice, esp. to something immoral."

This is the most common understanding of temptation. We find ourselves faced with people or situations that try to entice us to do something unhealthy or hurtful to ourselves or others.

Dare I say that all of us have a weakness for something that is not good for us.

Have you noticed, however, that temptations that once seemed unacceptable or not immoral no longer are?

When I was serving a church in Vermont, I lived in the town of Dummerston. In a publication called "The Dummerston Handbook" there's a section entitled "How Times Have Changed" on the School page. They reprinted the 1848 Teacher's Lists of Punishments and Hickory Stick Licks" from 1848.

This was at a time when corporal punishment, unfortunately was acceptable, and these were the "lick's" a child received for certain behaviors:

Telling lies: 7

Swearing: 8

Making Swings and Swinging on them: 7

Giving Each other Ill names: 3

For not saying “Yes, Sir,” or “No sir,” or Yes, Marm, or “No Marm”: 2

By today’s standards, these seem like extreme punishments.

But I wonder if we’ve gone too far in our permissiveness, particularly when it comes to adult behavior.

I’m sure you are familiar with the advertising phrase, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”

I’m a fan of sayings on bumper stickers and T shirts. I saw this one in a store, also in Vermont. It read, “What happens in Vermont, stays in Vermont, but nothing ever happens in Vermont.”

Perhaps we could say the same thing about Connecticut, or much of New England. and even much of the country from Pennsylvania to Wyoming.

But the Las Vegas phrase implies this: you can do anything you want in Las Vegas ---because no one will find out.

And if no one knows, then it’s all right. Like the old question: If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears or sees it, did it really fall?

While we don’t want to return to corporal punishment for our children, we have to admit that we really are dumbing-down in the area of morality, aren’t we?

Pete Gomes, Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard Divinity School observed this.

“The greatest work of the devil is that he has made us believe there is no devil.”

A common introduction to a Call to Confession during worship uses these words: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.”

We flinch at the word “sin,” don’t we? It’s a harsh word and it conjures images of devils and fiery punishments in hell. But we do need to admit that we do have the ability to give into temptations that cause us to act in ways that are not pleasing to God.

The early 20th century Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, had an understanding of the importance of spirituality in psychological well-being. It was he who first articulated the concept of “the shadow side” of our personalities.

This is a sophisticated and modern concept, but it corresponds quite closely to the ancient and classic notion of the devil.

Like the devil, our shadow side draws us to do things that are not especially healthy. Even if we have the best of intentions, we are all subject to temptations, as St. Paul freely admitted in our Epistle lesson this morning: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

Most of us are familiar with the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by the author, Robert Louis Stevenson.

It tells of a man who is a physician by day and a murderer by night.

Because Dr. Jekyll is such an upstanding citizen, no one suspected that he had another side to his personality. We see this in criminology all the time.

How many friends and neighbors of someone who commits a violent or anti-social act, say, “He couldn’t have done that. He is such a nice guy.”

People who give into their temptations are not aware of, or conversant with the, shadow side of human nature.

A variation on the definition of temptation as written by Webster is this: “to test, to try”

This is what we find happening to Jesus in our scripture lesson this morning.

He is met with temptation, symbolized by the devil, who certainly tries to test Jesus by offering him the world, if he will worship him, that is, give his soul to him.

The Rev. Samuel Chandler, Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, Georgia in a sermon entitled “A Friend of the Devil,” made an interesting observation about Jesus’ encounter.

“We all know that the devil is not the long-tailed fiery red creature we see caricatured. The devil does not sit on our shoulder with mean advice and a pitchfork But on, the other hand, most of us do not imagine either that the devil might just be a rather normal conversation partner.”

Or, we might add, even a friend, who invites us to join him in an unhealthy behaviors. Activities like gambling, for example, are presented to us as socially acceptable and a merely enjoyable pastime.

There’s a wise saying that goes something like this, “The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know.”

If we’re not in touch with our shadow side, not aware that temptation can get the better of us, we may find ourselves in all kinds of trouble.

“Things forbidden have secret charms,” wrote Tacitus, the first century Roman senator and historian.

A little over a year ago we heard the testimony before Congress of the attorney for a national leader, who was sentenced to 3 years in prison.

Despite his honorable upbringing, he freely admitted to giving into temptation. Here are some of his words:

I have always tried to live a life of loyalty, friendship, generosity, and compassion – qualities my parents ingrained in my siblings and me since childhood.

It is painful to admit that I was motivated by ambition at times.

It is even more painful to admit that many times I ignored my conscience and acted loyal to a man when I should not have.

It seems unbelievable that I was so mesmerized . . . that I was willing to do things for him that I knew were absolutely wrong.

It was my job to defend and lie for [the man for whom I worked]. And it monopolized my life.”

(-TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL D. COHEN COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FEBRUARY 27, 2019)

Last December, the US District Judge who sentenced him said this:

“[He] pled guilty to a veritable smorgasbord of fraudulent conduct. "Each of the crimes involved deception and each appears to have been motivated by personal greed and ambition."

We can debate about whether this individual, or any other prominent figure who engages in behaviors that many of us would find unacceptable, is sincere in his apology. But what is more instructive for all of us is the fact that temptations exist and all of us have it in our natures to give into one kind or another.

Those who study over-eating, for example, have noted that people who over-indulge in food get into a kind of a “zone,” or an almost trance-like state.

They lose the awareness of how much they are eating, or the weight they will gain. I imagine it’s the same for any other kind of unhealthy behavior. As the attorney to our national leader said, he was MESMERIZED.

Hormones and chemicals take over our bodies, our brains.

We lose perspective, and have little or no awareness of the consequences of our actions, or even time. Like our witness said, his actions MONOPOLIZED his life.

This information should not excuse our behavior, but it should lead to greater insight about how temptation works.

Our scripture lesson this morning ends with a sentence that is easy to miss, but that gives me pause.

Jesus warns the devil, after resisting his temptations, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ But Luke writes, ominously, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

Luke, wise man that he was, knew that even though the devil may not always prevail, he does not give up.

So we are reminded that we have to be vigilant about the existence of temptations in our lives and our potential for moments of weakness.

Webster’s fourth definition of temptation is simply this: “to incline strongly.” And this definition is the source of our hope.

Some of you may remember the Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen.

He was, among other things, the auxiliary Bishop of NYC back in the 1950’s and 60’s.

He was the first preacher to use television with any degree of success.

We might say he was the first TV Evangelist: He actually won an Emmy Award. You may have seen tapes of his program. They re-run them on the Catholic TV network. He was very popular and very dramatic.

He wore his Bishop’s cape and would gesture dramatically, point and play to the camera. It’s almost comical to watch him now—he used techniques of stage acting that are very old fashioned today.

But this is what he said about temptation. “We have more temptations to be good than to be bad.”

I guess it all depends on where you go and who your friends are.

But he’s correct: if we look in the right places, we’ll find wonderful opportunities to be tempted, to be INCLINED, to be, good and do the things that are good for us.

People who are trying to break addictions are advised to replace unhealthy behaviors with healthier ones.

Instead of eating french fries, we should go for a walk. The endorphins and other good chemicals that are produced in our brains will put us in a better mood than we would be in if we eat carbohydrates.

When faced with a choice between broccoli and chocolate, we might not be quite able to say, “You know, I’m really tempted to eat that broccoli.”

But we might be able to say, “You know, I’m really tempted to take a bouquet of flowers to my homebound neighbor, or write a big check to ...name your favorite charity...or volunteer to tutor kids in Hartford.”

My friends, may we be always mindful of our shadow side, bring it to the surface and meet it head on, like Jesus did in his encounter with the devil.

But more importantly, may we look to the example of Christ, who, when faced with temptation by the dark forces of life, was able to affirm very clearly about who he was and whose he was because resisting temptation was not a struggle, but merely second nature. And in so doing, may we grow evermore into his likeness. AMEN.

MUSICAL REFLECTION *Change My Heart, O God* Tune: CHANGE MY HEART

The First Baptist Church, Wilmington, North Carolina
<https://youtu.be/CZN7mXBwy7Q>

PRAYER

O God, we thank you that you have formed us in love and have called us to serve you by reflecting your goodness in the world.

We acknowledge that we are surrounded by less than loving behavior, or things that we think we might like or want but that in the end are in conflict with your will.

In a world that is filled with testing and even temptation, we know that you wish to make us stronger by the facing of it.

We thank you for the power of your Spirit and the example of Christ to guide us. And so we ask that make us the people you need us to be to accomplish the mission you have for us. Give us wisdom to discern the the things that are good for the living of a loving and productive life and the strength to resist the things that do not support physical, mental and spiritual health, well being and the common good.

Forgive us if we complain or become impatient with our current circumstances during our encounters with physical distancing and separation from people and things we care about.

Continue to help us to understand that these sacrifices are for the common good. While we may be inconvenienced and challenged in certain ways, we are grateful for all of the medical professionals, public servants and all of those have jobs that make our lives easier, and even endanger their lives during this time. We are especially mindful of those who are suffering from this virus and those who have contracted it while attending to them.

We pray for healing everywhere, not only for ourselves but for all who suffer...

-from violence and injustice,

poverty and prejudice.

and lack of belonging or purpose,

-from diseases of the body, mind and spirit, and those who love and care for them.

We pray:

-for those facing death and those who minister to them,

-for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones and people who served the community and the common good.

In our own lives, we bring to you now our joys and concerns....

All these things we offer, using the words of the prayer that Jesus taught us,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

I Need Thee Every Hour

Tune: NEED

Female Choir, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

<https://youtu.be/XO-I8XgU5ac>

OUR COMMON COMMISSION

Let us now forth into the world in peace.
Being of good courage.
Holding fast to that which is good.
Rendering to no one evil for evil.
Strengthening the fainthearted.
Supporting the weak.
Helping the afflicted.
Honoring all persons.
Loving and serving the Lord,
And rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION

The Lord be with you this week
Within you to purify you,
Above you to draw you up,
Beneath you to sustain you,
Before you to lead you,
Behind you to restrain you,
And around you to protect you.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. AMEN.

OFFERING

Although we are not gathering in the sanctuary for worship on Sundays for the time being, the church continues to have expenses. So it would be most appreciated if pledges and offerings could be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 307, New Hartford, CT 06057. Thank you for your generosity.

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NEXT WEEKEND

- TAG SALE: Friday August 14 and Saturday August 15. Check the church website for hours.
- NEXT SUNDAY, August 16: 9 a.m., Outdoor Worship, Weather permitting. We will continue our practice of physical distancing. Please wear a mask.