

## THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

***Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "all these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."*** Matthew 4:8-9

Last week we concluded our core stories from the Old Testament. From today until Labor Day, we will be focusing on the important passages from the New Testament. So far, the only stories we have looked at from the life of Jesus was during Advent and Christmas.

We now focus on Jesus the adult. Our story for today comes from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Just after his baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. Notice the temptation of Jesus takes place in the wilderness. The temptation of Jesus did not take place in a Tavern in Jerusalem. It did not take place in his carpenter's shop where he could cheat a customer. It did not occur when he had a chance to deceive a tax collector. The source of Jesus' temptation was not another human being. He was alone in the wilderness when he wrestled with temptation. In this context the devil tempts Jesus with several different images of what it might mean to be the Messiah.

In one temptation he is offered the power to turn stones into bread. He could be the messiah who brought material prosperity to the Jewish people. What benefits he could bring to the powerless and outcaste in Judah and Galilee. He could make sure no one would starve. He could lift up the poor and make Israel prosper again like the time of Solomon. The stock market would rise and GDP growth would set records.

In a second test, Jesus is tempted to become the messiah of security. He is taken to the high pinnacle and told to jump and God will hold you up. One of the great drives in humanity is for security. We want to be safe from all semblance of harm. Jesus could have been the messiah that would keep humans from all harm. He might have gathered forces to protect the people.

In a third temptation the devil offers Jesus power over the whole world. He is given a vision of the kingdoms of the world and offered power over all of them if he would worship the prince of darkness. Jesus could have seen his mission as using this power for good in bringing his rule of justice, love and peace to the world.

It is important to remember that these temptations are not necessarily about things bad in and of themselves. Wealth, security and peace are goods that all human beings desire. In fact, for most Jewish people these things were what the Messiah was all about. The Jewish people longed for a messiah who would come to restore the people as in the time of David and Solomon. The common understanding of messiah in the first century was of a very powerful person who would gather his forces, throw out the Romans and create a wealthy, secure Israel.

Jesus did not resist these temptations because the goals were bad in themselves but rather because they would have kept him from being the messiah he was called to be. He came not to fix material and security concerns. He did not come to create an earthly kingdom. Jesus knew his kingdom was not of this world. His purpose was to restore the relationship between God and human beings.

We often reduce temptation to the impulse to do wrong. Jesus was not tempted to sin, he was invited to ignore God's will. He was presented by Satan with different ways he could have distorted what it means to be the Messiah that God was calling him to be. We too are tempted to gain our identity from something other than God's love for us.

One example is gaining our sense of worth by exercising power over others. In the story of Jesus' temptation in both Matthew and Luke we find Jesus tempted by power. The tempter offers Jesus power over the whole world, if Jesus would worship him. In this temptation, Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and tells him that they all could be his, if he would just bow down and worship him.

On one level we can understand that Jesus was offered pure power. Satan offered Jesus control of all the kingdoms of this world. Power can be a great temptation for people. I believe that most politicians begin their careers wanting to accomplish something for the common good. Yet, so often, power becomes an end in itself. Robert Caro in his book about the early years of Lyndon Johnson wrote this chilling paragraph:

**The more one thus follows Johnson's life, the more apparent it becomes that alongside the thread of achievement runs another thread, as dark as the other is bright, and as fraught with consequences for history: a hunger for power in its most naked form, for power not to improve the lives of others, but to manipulate and dominate them, to bend them to his will. For the more one learns- from his family, his childhood playmates, his college classmates, his first assistants, his congressional colleagues- about Lyndon Johnson, the more it becomes apparent not only that this hunger was constant through his life, but that it was a hunger so fierce and consuming that no consideration of morality or ethics, no cost to himself- or to anyone else- could stand before it.**

You and I may not all gain the same amount of power as Lyndon Johnson, yet many ordinary people seek to gain their identity from exercising power over people. We see this at work when people seek to bully or manipulate their employees. We recognize this in families in which a member seeks to control the lives of their spouse or children. A raw example of this is in batterers. Men who abuse their wives do so in order to maintain control over them. This control enforced by fear gives them a sense of power and worth.

Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world. Time after time in his earthly ministry, Jesus rejected the notion that he was called to exercise power, as we understand it. Many wanted him to be a military and political leader who would defeat the Romans. Jesus rejected defining his worth by how much power he could accumulate in the world. He said, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"

In today's culture another form of this temptation is to gain our sense of worth from ourselves. The language of self-esteem, and self-actualization can be translated into lives in which people seek to find meaning and self-worth from a sense of self-importance. We are to become people who set all the rules. We become little Gods.

One of the most influential leaders and a commentator on the financial markets and the economy is Laurence Kudlow. Kudlow was born in New Jersey in 1947 to a secular Jewish family. He studied politics and economics at Princeton. In the 1970's and 80's he worked at the New York Federal Reserve Bank and the Office of Management and Budget. Later he took a job making more than \$1 million a year at Bear Stearns.

In 1994 he lost his job because of a severe addiction to cocaine.

In an interview he spoke of his conversion to Christianity in a Catholic Church in 1996. A friend of his took him to church. The effect was profound. He says:

**I liked the robes, the smoke. I loved it. All these rituals and rules. I began to realize that for the past eight or ten years I had been living without them. I was the rule. I was so self-centered. I'd just do whatever I felt like. I was in my master-of-the-universe period. You can't live that way. Nobody can. I knew it wasn't good and the drugs and the booze were part of it.**

**You become so self-centered and self-willed that you decide you can do anything, without regard for others. I wasn't showing up for events, for friends, for my wife.**

Kudlow learned that when we seek to find meaning and worth by making ourselves the center of all things we court disaster. His life became a mess.

Kudlow's life began to turn around when he realized that his life would have meaning in serving Christ. This became clear to him in the Lord's Supper. He tells us:

**We are partaking of the body and blood of Christ. That's what I understand the Eucharist to be. We are pledging our faith in him and what he taught and all of a sudden it clicked, that Jesus Christ does not want me to touch alcohol or drugs because I wreck my body and I wreck his body and I wreck my life. Jesus died for me too. And that is my redemption. I'm not a Catholic intellectual. I will never be one. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in how I live my life each day. How I conduct my relationships with people. My view of Lord Jesus is very basic in that sense.**

Kudlow had finally overcome the same temptation as Jesus. He came to understand that meaning in life comes from service to God. He did not have to create self-worth. He learned that he is of such worth that Jesus died for him.

In many ways behind each of these Great Temptations is the fear that we are just not worthy. The great Roman Catholic priest writer Henri Nouwen tells us:

**“Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, ‘Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.’ ... [My dark side says,] I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.”**

There is a great temptation for each one of us to believe that our worth is determined by circumstances outside our core being. We can come to actually believe that we are either important or worthless depending upon how much of the world’s goods we own or how much power, or fame or status, we can muster at any point in time. We can make the mistake of defining who we are by our place in society or how much power we have over others.

Our worth, our identity comes from God. We are God’s beloved. He loved us so much he sent Jesus to die for us. We are worth so much to God; Jesus was willing to pay the ultimate price on the cross. As St. Augustine tells us **God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.**

Do not let the tempter question your self-worth. Instead come to the table to be fed by Jesus. The writer Shauna Niequist tells us:

**“We don't come to the table to fight or to defend. We don't come to prove or to conquer, to draw lines in the sand or to stir up trouble. We come to the table because our hunger brings us there. We come with a need, with fragility, with an admission of our humanity. The table is the great equalizer, the level playing field many of us have been looking everywhere for. The table is the place where the doing stops, the trying stops, the masks are removed, and we allow ourselves to be nourished, like children. We allow someone else to meet our need. In a world that prides people on not having needs, on going longer and faster, on going without, on powering through, the table is a place of safety and rest and humanity, where we are allowed to be as fragile as we feel.”**

So come to the table to know the love of Jesus that makes us whole.