

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

March 6, 2022
The First Sunday in Lent

Luke 9:28-36
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2,9-16
Romans 10:8b-13

This morning, I want us to look at two things...temptation and confession. And, we are going to consider them as two parts of an equation.

We all know what temptation feels like. It is after all, a universal experience. The tug at our conscience when we know we aren't making the right choice. When you eat the last cookie and swear you didn't do it. When we look over your friends shoulder during an exam or take credit for a job we didn't do. When we give in to having another drink, start a simple flirtation with a co-worker or cheat on our taxes. Surely, you can think of so many more examples.

But, how willing are we to take responsibility when we have fallen into temptation? How willing are we to confess when we haven't been honest, when we haven't lived with integrity and have fallen short of the values we claim to hold?

Falling into temptation is easy. Getting out of it is a little more challenging.

Temptation is easy because we tell ourselves it won't hurt anyone. We rationalize that the end justifies the means. On the surface, it's the quick fix to happiness. In reality, it's the source of deep dissatisfaction because when you start down that path, your heart will always be unsettled. And yet, we fall victim to it over and over again. Convincing ourselves that a little deception is no big deal.

But, in our gut, we know the truth...temptation is a bottomless pit that fails to ever produce a worthy justification. Yet, confessing when we have fallen into temptation is so incredibly hard because it means that we have to deal with the consequences and take responsibility for our choices.

Temptation and Confession. Our Gospel reading takes us into the heart of temptation and it is our Lenten season that we have entered that guides us to confession.

There's a reason we have this particular Gospel reading at the beginning of our Lenten journey. When we consider Jesus' temptation in the desert, we are asked to consider those moments of our own temptations, our own sins. Because, we have surely been there, too.

And, Lent provides for us an opportunity to live into a season of courageous confession and redemption. It's a time of deep honesty and reflection...to name what we have done wrong and what we have failed to do right. We take those terrifying first steps of accountability and ask for

forgiveness and claim a readiness to work towards reconciliation. Lent offers a promise that confession will always be stronger than temptation.

I love the Greek translation of the word temptation. It is defined as a trial of a person's fidelity, integrity, and virtue. A trial of *fidelity*. That is a test of your faithfulness to a person, cause, or belief. A trial of *integrity*. A test of the quality of your honesty and moral principles. A trial of *virtue*. A test of your outward behavior where you choose to live into high moral standards. Fidelity, integrity and virtue.

In other words...can we be faithful to the things we have been taught to be good and right and just even if the world pulls us in other, more appealing directions? Can we remain honest and moral even when it may mean we don't come out on top or get the satisfaction we think we deserve? And, can we make those choices publicly even when it's hard or unpopular? Will we stake our reputation, our character, on being the kind of person God calls us to be?

OK. Let's pause for a moment. How many of you are already trying to justify a decision you have made that you knew wasn't right? Are you thinking...this whole thing about temptation and confession doesn't apply to me and my situation? If so...great! Because that's where we can start to do some really good work!

Look at our Gospel reading. Jesus is asked to turn his back on what he knows is right. In fact, the devil tries to convince him that all the "rules" don't apply to him. In other words, your God doesn't know you like I know you. I can give you so much more. It's a test of Jesus' fidelity.

The temptation for Jesus starts small enough – just turn this stone into a loaf of bread...who would ever know? That's a trial of his virtue, of his outward behavior.

It's just a rock and the bread will be good to eat. The devil encourages him...it will just be between you and me. That's a trial of his integrity, his willingness to uphold the things he claims to believe, even when no one else will know.

Temptation works like that. It often starts with a seemingly insignificant act that tests your commitments. Something simple that draws us in, that makes it easy to choose something that we know isn't right. It chips away at your morality and makes you doubt the importance of your character.

And so, our Lenten season allows us an opportunity to get very honest with ourselves about when temptation took hold. On Ash Wednesday, our Lenten invitation states that we are to put in mind the opportunity for "pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith." And, we are told to do so, "by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature..."

Here's a simple way to think about it....First, name the temptation. Be honest about what you are struggling with and why. Second, confess where and when you have fallen to temptation. Third, ask for forgiveness when you have made a bad choice. And finally, commit to changing your actions so that you start to live from a place of greater integrity.

I love bringing the concepts of temptation and confession together. Because, we have become a society that no longer wants to admit our mistakes. We will do almost anything to prove our rightness at the expense to someone else. We are far too willing to believe what we want to believe, cheat if it will give us a better life, and lie if it will make us seem smarter or stronger.

Our world seems to be based on the success of temptation...the temptation to have the most attractive body, the highest paying job, the smartest kids, the biggest house, the greatest control, the most influential perspectives, the largest amount of resources. And...if you believe that getting those things is more important than things like compassion, justice, fairness, honesty, character, and virtue...well, you are ripe for temptation to take hold.

And, so, we must be willing to confess when it does. To confess when our values haven't lived up to the teaching of Jesus.

Folks, our world is breaking. Our communities are struggling. Our loved ones are hurting. And...Lent reminds us that we can do something about it. But, it has to start within our own hearts and we have to admit our own failings so that we can commit to working for a better tomorrow...a better tomorrow that isn't just about what we want but about what the world needs.

Lent holds us close and reminds us that there is no temptation too small for confession and no temptation too big for forgiveness. This is where it starts. This is where healing may begin. Thanks be to God. Amen.