

Temptation as Distraction

Romans 5:12-19

*For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners,
so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.*

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

“Our Covenant One with Another” is the statement of commitment written for the Church of the Covenant at its beginning. The first sentence of that statement is: “I understand that the purpose of our church is to bind together followers of Jesus Christ for the purpose of sharing the worship of God and in making God’s will dominant in the lives of people, individually and collectively, as that will is set forth in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in Holy Scripture.” Those who would feel called to make this commitment would be Covenant Members, and would devote themselves for one year at a time to working seriously with the spiritual disciplines described in the covenant statement. This is what would make the Church of the Covenant a different kind of spiritual community, making explicit the things expected of and needed by one who wanted to follow Jesus Christ. Daily prayer and study of scripture. Financial giving beginning with a tithe. Faithful worship with the community of faith. Fulfilling the call to serve the community itself or the wider world in specific ways. Seeking guidance and help of others in fulfilling one’s commitment. Renewing one’s commitment annually as called by God. When we added Community Membership about three years ago, the same principle was involved. For Christian discipleship to have meaning and for persons to grow in their relationship with God through Christ, a commitment to working with particular spiritual practices is not only needed but also essential..

When I describe this to people in other churches, they sometimes shrug their shoulders and smile: Isn’t that what is expected of any Christian? They don’t see anything radical in it, and there really isn’t. The difference is that we make it explicit that membership in the community of faith means making such commitments to our own spiritual lives. The radical stuff happens as those who make such a commitment really work with it on a daily basis and experience along the way how their spiritual practice transforms their lives.

It is about following Jesus, not being a member of a church. And following Jesus is about deepening our own relationship with God as we look to and learn from Jesus’ life, teachings and spirit. It is about finding in Jesus the pattern and essence of our true humanity. It is about that journey of faith we talk so much about, the journey inward as our deepening relationship with God, and the journey outward as our living out what we believe God has called us to do for and to give to the world.

This week I reflected on this originating vision of the Church of the Covenant in light of the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. What came to mind was why committing ourselves to and working with spiritual disciplines is so important. It is not a matter of earning spiritual brownie points. It is not a matter of legalistically fulfilling a set of religious or spiritual requirements so we can feel good about ourselves. The spiritual practices that we work with enable us to keep in touch with our relationship with God. They help us keep focused on that relationship on a daily basis, and to discern who God has made us to be and what God has called and gifted us to do for the sake of the world.

The story of Jesus' temptation tells of Jesus' own experience of having his relationship with God tested, challenged. Every major religious tradition recognizes that such experiences are very important for our faith. Testing is seen as a part of the life of faith. Without testing, faith cannot deepen, cannot become real for us. Faith is a matter of choices we make, what we decide to value and not to value, to hold onto and to let go of. Biblically, testing is the experience in life of having to make those choices.

Out in the wilderness, Satan presents Jesus with three tests. The first two strike at Jesus' relationship with God. "If you are the Son of God," says Satan. He is trying to get at any insecurity or need to prove himself that Jesus might have. Jesus does not bite. Each time Jesus touches his relationship with God, a relationship of complete trust. There is no need to defend himself or prove himself. And there is no need to show proof of God's care of him. The third temptation is a blatant offer to Jesus: I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if only you will shift your worship from God to me! We might note that Satan says that the kingdoms and their worldly power are his to deliver. I'm not sure exactly what this means, but it causes us to wonder about the spiritual wisdom of trying to gain worldly power and influence. Though Jesus' life and teachings clearly lift up the issues of human injustice and the need to call religious and political powers to account for working in just and humane and peaceful ways, Jesus himself never launched a political movement to wrest power from those in charge. Nonetheless, Jesus' response to Satan is a simple rejection: Get out of here, Satan! It is written that we are to worship and serve God alone. With that, the tempter exits, and God's angels come and care for Jesus.

As I thought about this story in relationship to how we work with a committed spiritual life of following Jesus in our relationship with God, it occurred to me that there is another word we might use to convey for us in our time and situation the meaning of "temptation." It is "distraction." We all know what it means to be distracted. Week before last, I was driving home down Boonsboro Road on a messy afternoon. A car up ahead suddenly stopped. The car in front of me was able to stop in time. I wasn't. I braked but slid into him. We both pulled over. The driver got out and walked back to meet with me. He smiled in a friendly way and said, "Neither one of us needed this today, did we?" He explained how the car in front of him had given no warning as it stopped, and this made me feel a bit better. But after we traded insurance information and I called my insurance company, I realized that the accident had the effect of waking me up. I had been distracted. No, maybe the accident could not have been avoided. But still I became aware of how my mind had been on a dozen other things. That's distraction.

Last summer I was at the Home Depot picking up something for a project here. While the woman at the cash register was ringing up my items, I was gazing off in the distance, my eyes on one of the distant store aisles, my mind, again, somewhere else. The woman finished and as I prepared to pay, she smiled and said gently, "You're thinking of the next thing, aren't you?" The point was well taken!

We get distracted so easily. It does not take much. We not only get distracted from such daily things but also from who we are, from our very lives, from what matters most. I listened recently to an NPR report from South Korea. It was about how computer games have consumed the minds of young people. Those who excel in them are treated like Olympic athletes. Children and young people spend hours every day, at home or at video cafes, sitting in front of screens, playing incessantly in the disconnected world of virtual reality. There is a dark side to this. Many of these children and youth are being treated at special clinics. They are failing in school. They are depressed. They are out of touch with their families and with reality itself.

If we start thinking in terms of distractions that are around us all the time, we can each come up with any number of them. They are the things that lure us away from life, from knowing who we are, from giving ourselves to things that really matter and that give life to us as well as others. There are things that keep us distracted from our own inner struggles and suffering, so that we try to find solace and happiness from something or someone outside of ourselves. Materialism is a tremendously alluring distraction. If I only had this or that, I would be happy. If I only made more money or had a job that earned the respect of others, I would be fulfilled. There are distractions that keep us from seeing and being involved with the sufferings of others. Our discomfort with others' sufferings can lead us to become detached and withdrawn. Yet this brings only a temporary and false sense of well being. There is also the distraction of holding onto our anger and hurt, or our preoccupation with the ways others are or are not living their lives. There is the distraction of keeping busy, of doing so many things that we never take the time to be with ourselves, to touch the joy of our own simple being.

Kaye and I were in Williamsburg Friday and Saturday at the annual Disciples ministers and mates retreat. I was leading worship and music for the event. On Friday morning, an hour was given over to various small groups that introduced people to resources for their own spiritual lives. In the large meeting room, a group was being led in a labyrinth walk. A cloth labyrinth was laid on the floor and several people were walking meditatively along its paths. As I walked through the room, aware of what was going on, I brought my awareness to my own walking, slowed down, took a few mindful breaths, and realized again how distracted I become. I also realized how easy it really is to come back to myself, to become present and aware.

I still have a long way to go to be as fully aware of and alive in my relationship with God as I would like. Yet I see, also, how far I have come over the years. What progress I have made has been the fruit of a spiritual practice that has enabled me to be aware of my distractions, to see them, and to choose again my relationship with God as most important. What I have realized even more fully since becoming part of

this community is just how important it is to be part of a community of practice, a community in which others are working with the same things. It is so easy in this society and world of ours to get lost, to become filled with all sorts of stuff that has nothing to do with who we really are and with our relationship with God. But when we are in community with others who are working with the same distractions, the same temptations, and practicing those things that help us stay grounded in our relationship with God, then it is much easier. We find encouragement and we learn from one another.

Jesus refused to be distracted from his relationship with God and from what God had called him to do with his life, his vocation. His faithfulness was so complete that we draw strength and power from him to live our own lives with the same kind of faithfulness. There will always be distractions, temptations that challenge our awareness of our lives in God, of who we are in God and what God is calling us to do. The commitments we make to following Jesus and live out through the spiritual practices we work with give our lives the kind of shape that enables us to continue day by day to remain in touch with who we really are as those created, loved, and called by God.