

March 13, 2011 / First Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

**Spiritual Practice and Temptation:
Touching Our Life with God**

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.” In other words, the vision was to take seriously the life of faith as persons in community with others. 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. Daily prayer and study of scripture. Financial giving beginning with a tithe. Faithful worship with the community. Endeavoring to show love and forgiveness in all relationships. Responding to the call to serve the community itself or the wider world in specific ways. Seeking guidance and help from others in fulfilling one’s commitment. Renewing one’s commitment annually as called by God. When we added Community Membership about five years ago, the same principle was involved. For the life of faith to be real and have meaning, and for persons to grow in their relationship with God, others, and the world, a commitment to working with particular spiritual practices is essential. It is about finding our true humanity. It is about that journey of faith we talk so much about, the journey inward, opening ourselves more fully to our relationship with God, and the journey outward, living out what we feel God has called us to do for and

give to the world.

It is helpful to look at the story of Jesus' temptation in light of our life as a community with this particular vision and call. The story speaks to why committing ourselves to and working with spiritual disciplines is so important. It is not about earning spiritual brownie points or being more "religious" or "spiritual" than others. It is not the legalistic performing of a set of requirements so we can feel good about ourselves or so we can belong. The spiritual practices that we work with keep us in touch with our relationship with God, others, the world, and our own lives. They are our daily touchstone, a framework within which we discern and awaken to the persons God has made us to be, and to what God has called and gifted us to do for the sake of the world.

Diarmuid O'Murchu is an Irish Catholic writer in the area of spirituality. His writings have helped me see the difference between religion, which tends to perpetuate and turn in on itself, and spirituality which has to do with the fullness of our humanity. For O'Murchu, Jesus was far more about spirituality than religion. He has a book entitled *POVERTY, CELIBACY, AND OBEDIENCE: A RADICAL OPTION FOR LIFE*. He is not proposing we all become monks and nuns! In fact, he speaks against the way vows have been understood and practiced by the church. Vows are not a path to personal salvation or moral perfection. O'Murchu says that these vows have to do with staying connected to the values of life itself, and that such practices pre-date the rise of formal religions. This says to me that spiritual practices or disciplines are for the purpose of keeping us connected with the deepest values of life, keeping us grounded in what really matters, what is most real and good. O'Murchu writes: "Central to such values is the yearning to live harmoniously and creatively with ourselves, with others, with nature, and with God." (O'Murchu, p. 15). Making such commitments as persons and communities helps us live out that yearning.

Is that not what our community is about? Not a church organization or program that needs and recruits members to keep it all going, but a community of persons who feel called to live out our yearning to live in harmony with life. It is our recognizing in Jesus what our lives as human beings truly are and can

become. The practices or disciplines, simple and minimal as they are, can keep us on that path, that journey.

We all know that even with the strongest and deepest of desires and commitments, this journey is neither easy nor smooth. We encounter challenges, obstacles, experiences that test us so that we must choose again and again this way of life. Yet we learn that facing those times can bring depth, solidity, and increasing insight and joy.

This is also where the story of Jesus' temptation comes in, the testing of his relationship with God. Every major religious tradition recognizes the reality and importance of such experiences. 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.

Here I feel the need to say something about the figure of Satan. First, it is not important whether you think Satan is an actual, real being, or a symbol of something. Let's not get hung up on that. To make "belief" in Satan of central importance is to miss the boat. Second, in our scriptures the figure of Satan or the Devil NEVER has any real, positive force or power to exert. He only has the "power" to test, to challenge. There is no biblical support for "the Devil made me to it". Neither is there a cosmic war going on between God and Satan. The story is about the reality that living fully out of our relationship with God comes down to choices we make in the face of things that would distract us and lead us down dead-end paths.

Satan presents Jesus with three testings. The first two aim at Jesus' relationship with God by trying to get at his insecurities. "If you are the Son of God," says Satan. He is trying to needle Jesus into proving his relationship with God. Jesus does not bite the hook. Instead, Jesus touches his relationship with God, a relationship of complete trust. There is no need to defend himself or prove himself, or God. And there is no need to show proof of God's care of him. The third temptation is a blatant offer: 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 should cause us to wonder about those, who in the name of religion, including Christianity, try to gain political power and influence, to force their understanding of things on others. Jesus' response to Satan's offer of world domination is a simple, strong rejection: Get out of here, Satan! We are to worship and serve God alone. With that, the tempter exits, and God's angels come and care for Jesus.

We live in a time, a nation, and world that are soaked with violence, the desire for power, the loss of compassion, and so many distractions and harmful values. In our society we see religious persons and movements, calling themselves by Jesus' name, engaging in hate, the grasping of power, the embracing of war and other forms of violence, and the stripping away of care for the most vulnerable persons in our society, including children. It is a confusing and challenging time. It is a time when the story of Jesus' temptation speaks deeply to us. For we know, if we are endeavoring to follow Jesus and be a community of Jesus, that it is difficult to face and not buy into many things that are distractions, temptations, testings, things that can draw us away from the fullness of life as God created it to be lived. The disciplines with which we practice help us. They enable us to touch our relationship with God in the midst of confusion and challenge. When we can sit quietly, entering into the sanctuary of our hearts where we are connected with God, we can find the peace and clarity with which to remember who we really are and what life is really about. Each of the disciplines in its own way keeps us connected with values of life, with what matters most.

All of this is not easy. In his book *IF THE CHURCH WERE CHRISTIAN*, Philip Gulley has a chapter in which he talks about how the church needs to move in the direction of love and community, not the grasping and exerting of power. He writes of the temptation of power and its destructiveness, in our personal relationships, in our church communities, and in our society. To resist the will to power, to control, to violence can be very exhausting. To stand against values in our society that run counter to the spirit, life, and teachings of Jesus is

not a walk in the park. Gulley writes that he now has a deep appreciation for the ending of the temptation story, when the angels come to Jesus and minister to him. That is a beautiful statement, that living out the fullness of life to which Jesus calls us can be very challenging and exhausting. It can leave us wounded, exhausted, spiritually worn out, and sometimes feeling alone and isolated. In the midst of this, however, in whatever ways we may experience it, the angels come to serve us, to care for us. We touch the comforting, healing, encouraging presence of God. I think that one of those "angels" is our community itself, when we provide for one another the support, understanding, and encouragement we need as we struggle with whatever challenges, whatever temptations or testings, we encounter on the journey of faith and faithfulness. The "angel" of the community also ministers to us by encouraging us to keep working with our commitments and practices, for that is what will enable us to remain open to and to keep touching God's presence, sustaining power, and all-embracing love.