

## Fifth Sunday in Lent

3<sup>rd</sup> April 2022

Proverbs 22:8-9, 16 & Hosea 10:12

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*No Consequences*

**D**uring Lent we have been talking about the temptations that Jesus faced in the desert, and how the church, or at least the church as an institution of empire for the past 16 centuries, has pretty much said “yes” to the temptations Jesus denied. I think there was a time in the first few centuries where the followers of Jesus held some pretty distinctive beliefs that were in opposition to empire, but after Constantine, the interpretation of Christianity shifted dramatically to focus on right belief rather than actions that challenged imperial values and lifestyles.

If you’ve ever seen a sitcom where they tell the story from different points of view from each of the involved characters, you know that WHO tells the story, WHO does the interpretation matters to how it is told and interpreted. When the story of Jesus went from being told by the oppressed and the poor to being told by the people who were doing the oppressing and were themselves wealthy and powerful, the interpretations changed. We saw that same dynamic in the south among white churches during slavery, for example.

That interpretative shift

persists today and still has a profound impact on the way much of the church views Jesus—who he was and what his life, ministry, and death were about. So we've used the temptation story of Jesus to highlight some of those differences, those changes. And quite disturbingly, to note how the very temptations of Satan that Jesus rejected have become hallmarks of the institutional church—a pursuit of power, a focus on wealth, and an avoidance of worldly consequences for our actions.

This morning we are looking at the third temptation, where Jesus is invited to throw himself off the top of the temple, so that God can save Jesus and thereby show God's power.

So let me say again that I think this is an odd temptation. It's the final temptation Jesus faced, even if it's not the last one we'll explore,

because I think the other temptation—to claim to power of the kingdoms of the world, I think that one goes better with Palm Sunday next week, but this final temptation that Jesus faced functions on a few different levels, I think, all of which continue to entice the church today.

First off, this temptation is about safety. Specifically, it is about safety from consequences of our actions. It doesn't take a degree in physics to know that if you climbed up into our steeple and hurled yourself off onto F St., you would suffer some physical consequences for your actions. Satan's offer to Jesus, however, is to avoid those consequences—to throw himself off from the pinnacle of the temple and trust God to break his fall. The temptation is a lie that the church continues to buy into...that if you are really

loved by God, you shouldn't have to live with worldly pain or consequence.

In the first church I worked at after seminary, we had a white board with a line down the middle that hung in the church office. One side had blue tick marks, the other side had red. The church secretaries would keep a tally every Monday of the people that called in to complain whether the church was too hot to too cold on Sunday. If the red and blue marks were roughly equal, we figured the temperature was probably fine.

I appreciate creature comforts. Whenever I go camping with Wally and his scout troop, I notice how much I miss the comforts of home in a way I never did 30 years ago. But somehow the church has gone from a community of people who sold our possessions and put

ourselves in harm's way to stand up for the poor and disenfranchised and challenge the values of empire to social clubs where we get upset if the temperature isn't just right or we don't know that new hymn we sang or we get out ten minutes past noon and have to wait in line for lunch.

We've traded a purposeful life following the footsteps of Jesus for comfort and assurance that we'll get into heaven if we just say the right words. That's the Christianity of empire. Avoid discomfort, avoid cost, avoid consequences, and just focus on getting into heaven.

But the worst part, and the biggest cost of this temptation, goes beyond just prioritizing our comfort, though I think that's part of it. Along with avoiding discomfort, we've bought wholesale into the myth that

we can avoid the inevitable environmental costs of our greed and consumption because God will swoop in and save us from the worst of possible consequences for our actions. As a result, we've commoditized everything, including the very planet that gives us life, and given no thought to the consequences. We are disincentivized for leaving anything better than we found it because God will fix it for us.

Consider the comment from Michigan Representative Tim Walberg, who noted at a town hall meeting that, "I believe there's climate change...Do I think man has some impact? Yeah, of course...[but] as a Christian, I believe that there is a creator in God who is much bigger than us. And I'm confident that, if there's a real problem, he can take care of it."

Here is someone setting the laws for our country, for how we will protect the natural resources and the environment upon which we all depend, suggesting that God will protect us from the consequences of our actions, that if we put God to the test on this one, God will step us and keep us from dashing our foot against a stone. Once again, that's the Christianity of empire, not the path of Jesus.

Our national faith in the avoidance of consequences not only impacts our relationship with the earth but is dangerously detrimental to our sense of community as well. As a nation, our past is replete with instances of systemic injustices, from the enslavement of 12.5 million Africans to the genocide of an estimated 12 million indigenous peoples as we settled this country, from theft of land and resources

to forced conversions of native populations, from our exportation of unrestrained neoliberal capitalism to other countries and their subsequent destruction to our ongoing militaristic engagement with foreign countries for control of their natural resources, we have not been a beacon of light shining atop the mountain to other countries.

And yet, as a nation, we shut down attempts to teach our children about the sins of our past, so that they might learn from them and help shape a better future. We have given up regard for a functioning democracy in the future in our pursuit of political victory today at any cost. We simply don't care about the consequences of our actions today because we are more focused on a victorious political outcome than on building sustainable communities.

Every one of the bargains Satan offered Jesus in the desert was a Machiavellian trade. Focus on the end result and forget about the cost of getting there. Whether the trade is for unlimited resources or power, or the avoidance of consequences for our actions, Satan tempted Jesus to give up walking the more difficult path in favor of easy victory now. That has always been the temptation of empire, and it's one into which the church has bought wholeheartedly for centuries now.

And instead of embracing a path that can transform us, that can move us toward harmony with creation and one another, that can fill us with awe and wonder for our universe, we have allowed empire to transform the church into an institutionalized support system for our pursuit of power and wealth at any expense.

Every one of these temptations has something good to offer. If we aren't able to see the ways we, as Americans, as Christians, have been drawn into these bargains for centuries, we are missing the lesson of the temptation parable entirely. It's not a story about Jesus' miraculous ability to resist Satan in the desert—it's about all the ways the church continues to struggle to resist the temptations of empire in our own spiritual desert.

But in each case, in each temptation, Jesus' responses are instructive. Instead of taking the path of no consequences, Jesus replies that one should not put God to the test. The action of resistance Jesus chooses is trust. Specifically, to trust in God.

What does that look like? I don't think it looks like what Rep. Walberg suggests—that we can do whatever we please and trust

God to fix it. That, I think, is trusting the lies of empire and putting God to the test to keep us from the consequences of it.

Rather, if God is experienced in love, in community, then perhaps one response to the temptation of empire is to trust in one another and to act in love, which itself takes trust and vulnerability. To love another, to trust another, means that rather than pursuing comfort, we willingly help bear the suffering and burdens of one another, sharing pain and joy in a way that transforms us. In a moment or slowly over a lifetime, we are changed, moved, and maybe even transformed by what we share and experience together. That isn't a quick solution to today's problems without regard for consequences...it's a willingness to be vulnerable in the pursuit of loving communi-

ty.

Dorothy Day was a Roman Catholic advocate for social justice in the early half of the 20th century. She wrote the book, *The Long Loneliness*, about the transformative experience of working to love and create community among the poor and homeless in New York. She writes that, “Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other’s faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light a fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.”

“No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too

much.” That’s not an avoidance of sacrifice or suffering. It’s not an avoidance of consequences or pain or a belief that God will shield us from those things if we just believe enough. But if the opposite of testing God is trusting in God’s community, then we find ourselves in much the same position as Jesus’ early followers – not avoiding pain and consequences, but finding that, together, we can be a part of something greater with the power to effect change, resist empire, and help create communities that look a little more like the kingdom of God.

Blessed be. Amen.

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