

Fatal Distractions
Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:13
February 25, 2007

A contractor was bidding on a job. Left alone in the office of a prospective client, he noticed a copy of his competitor's bid on the desk, but he couldn't see the numbers because a jar partially covered the paper. Yielding to his baser impulses, he lifted the jar to sneak at peek at his competitor's bid. His face became ashen as hundreds of tiny BB's came spilling out from the bottomless jar, running all over the desk and onto the floor!¹

Most of us can relate to that kind of situation. Last Wednesday I found myself tempted to wash off the dark black smudge that marked my forehead after the noon Ash Wednesday service. I had a hospital call to make in Berkeley and another stop along the way. I didn't want to call attention to myself or attract the stares of others, so I considered whether to clean my forehead. I did not yield to the temptation of vanity, but I kept the ugly black smudge because I am a follower of Christ, and I have made a commitment to follow no matter what embarrassment or scorn might come my way. It even gave me an opportunity to speak to a stranger who summoned up the courage to ask, "Is it Ash Wednesday?" I replied affirmatively. She said, "You're the second person I've seen with ashes, so I figured. I'm a lapsed Catholic." I said, "The churches are open until 8:00 p.m. or so. It's a great day for coming home to God."

My momentary consideration of cleansing my brow of the cross of Christ is symbolic of other distractions that tempt us to deny our faith, to betray our God, and to reject our vocation as disciples of Jesus. Jesus faced temptation just as we do. Luke tells us that the source of Jesus' temptations was the devil. Living in the shadow of Mt. Diablo, we are familiar with the Greek word used for devil, *diabolos*. It means one who stirs things up or throws things around. There are times in which we become confused. Outside forces easily lure us away from the values we hold dear. We become lost in chaotic storms and can lose our footing when faced with seductive choices.

The temptations we face are not unlike those of Jesus. He was tempted to turn stones to bread to satisfy his physical hunger after forty days of fasting. He could have indulged his own material comfort, but Jesus recognized that personal indulgences would not ultimately offer him satisfaction. In making his decision, Jesus relied on scripture, "One does not live by bread alone." Jesus chose not to focus on himself and his own

immediate needs. Instead, later in his ministry he would make possible the feeding of thousands with a few loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus' mission was not to satisfy his own material needs, but those of others.

The second temptation he confronted was for political power over all the nations of the world. This might have put him on the fast track toward creating the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven, but the cost was forgoing worship of God for worship of the devil. It would mean using evil means toward a positive end. It was a choice between power by dominance and power through service. He held fast to his moral integrity and realized that even a worthy end does not justify wicked means. Again he relied on scripture, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

Finally Jesus was tempted by pride. He was invited to prove his own value by taking the risk of jumping hundreds of feet from the top of the temple to the rocky ground below, trusting that God would miraculously intervene by sending angels to protect him. The temptation was to think so highly of himself that he was of ultimate concern to God – and to anyone else for that matter. It's a need to be noticed and valued by others; the need to be popular amongst one's peers or social circles. It may be what haunts some of the celebrities who will walk the red carpet tonight at the Academy Awards, hoping to be admired for their flashy dress and trend-setting hairstyles, if not for their stellar acting performance, even if they weren't nominated for an Oscar. Rather than claiming such superior status and privilege, Jesus finds security in his humble position as a servant of God, and declares, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Jesus refused to allow the devil to mess around with his moral compass. He knows who he is and whose he is. He grounded his life in the values of God learned from scripture. He refused to put himself at the center of his mission. Although famished and weakened by his 40 day sojourn in the wilderness, Jesus refused to let his impulses control him. He stood firm in the foundation of faith. He does not let outside forces distract him from his God-given identity and mission.

Jesus was able to stand firm against the forces that lured him off course because of his unwavering allegiance to God as the ultimate ruler of the universe. He didn't try to change places with God. He was satisfied with his role of obedience to the far greater One. His trust of and obedience to God was grounded in his faith. That faith gave him bedrock values which determined the course of his life. He valued the satisfaction of basic needs for all persons over his own material comfort. He chose the way of service over the way of power. He did not seek his own adoration; his ultimate concern was the welfare of others. The motto of a narcissist is "Others exist

to adore me.”² Jesus’ motto was “I exist to serve God and others.” Grounded in his faith and those bedrock values, he resisted temptation and chose the higher road.

Knowing our values and what is of ultimate importance helps us when things are stirred up in our lives. Clarity about God’s desire for our lives and our relationships keeps us on the moral pathway when making decisions. As Jesus was grounded in the scriptures, it is vital for us to know the Word of God so that God directs our lives and living.

A rabbi always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, “Why ‘on’ our hearts, and not ‘in’ them?” The rabbi answered, “Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when the heart breaks, the holy words will fall inside.”³

Because we expose ourselves to the Word of God and the way of Jesus Christ, when the heart goes seeking answers and direction, the holy words will fall inside and be our guide. The holy words will help guard against those distractions that seduce us away from the way and will of God.

The fundamental issue of this biblical story is our human struggle to accept our limitations and to discern how to balance issues of power and control. Jesus was able and willing to let go of supernatural power and control and was willing to live within the boundaries of human life and reality. It is not so easy for us to relinquish our illusion of being “the best,” “the greatest,” “superior to all, inferior to none.” It’s hard to let go of the fantasy that “my way” is “the right way.” Clinging to control and power can be fatal to our relationships. It certainly diminishes the importance of God in our lives, for it puts us in the place of God. When we seek to triumph over others, we also destroy our relationships, for each human life has value and contributions to make to the greater good. When we accept our own limitations, we grow in appreciation for the gifts of others. Our relationships become interdependent and mutually beneficial. When we are honest about our true selves, life is far less complicated. We don’t have to play games of manipulation and deceit. We accept the boundaries of human life and we are grateful for what we have.

A story describes what happens when power and control become fatal distractions in our lives. In a large town there were two merchants who were fierce competitors. Their stores were across the street from each other. The sole method each man had of determining the success of his business was not daily profit, but how much more business he had than his competitor. If a customer made a purchase at the store of one merchant, he would taunt his

competitor when the sale was complete. The rivalry grew with each succeeding year.

One day God sent an angel to one of the merchants with an offer. “The Lord God has chosen to give you a great gift,” the angel said, “whatever you desire, you will receive. Ask for riches, long life, or healthy children, and the wish is yours. There is one stipulation,” the angel cautioned. “Whatever you receive, your competitor will get twice as much. If you ask for 1,000 gold coins, he will receive 2,000. If you become famous, he will become twice as famous.” The angel smiled. “This is God’s way of teaching you a lesson.” The merchant thought for a moment. “You will give me anything I request?” The angel nodded. The man’s face darkened. “I ask that you strike me blind in one eye.”⁴

The man seized the opportunity to exert “power over” his competitor. Do you think that he ultimately got the satisfaction he was seeking by witnessing the destruction of his neighbor?

Compare that story to another story about competitors, this time a real story out of the 2003 Tour de France:

Lance Armstrong’s bike flipped out from under him when his handlebar snagged a spectator’s purse. Armstrong hit the ground hard. Bleeding, he got back on his feet, and his fiercest competitor, Jan Ullrich, slowed down to wait for him.

Why did he do this? Why not use Armstrong’s fall as a chance to get ahead?

This act of sportsmanship was payback for a similar incident in 2001, when Ulrich wiped out on a dangerous downhill, and Armstrong waited for him to catch up. It’s an unwritten rule among the riders that you don’t attack when a competitor is down. They believe that the winner of the Tour de France should be determined by strength alone, not by bad luck.

“You want the strongest man to win,” said a rider. “Had Jan Ulrich kept going and won the stage, it wouldn’t have been fair.”⁵

Had either biker taken advantage of his competitor’s fall, he might have won the race as far as the clock was concerned, but he would have lost the status and honor afforded the honest winner. Neither let his competitor’s disadvantage distract him from the purpose and integrity of the race.

Temptations will continue to come our way. They are part of the struggle of life. They will come in a variety of forms, each trying to distract us from the values of a Christ-like life. May we so ground ourselves in the Word of God and the way of Jesus that we have the strength and courage to resist such fatal distractions, to stand firm in our faith, and to keep God at the center of our moral compass.

¹ Stephen K. Nash, *Homiletics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 64.

² Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), p. 122.

³ *Tales of the Hasidim*, quoted by Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Way*, March 2007.

⁴ Dianne Andrews, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume 18, No. 2, p. 39.

⁵ Sally Jenkins, *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2003. Quoted in *Homiletics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 64.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA