

The Great Temptations of Our Time

Lake Street Church of Evanston

Rev. Michael Woolf

March 1, 2020

There have probably been several million sermons preached about temptation in the Christian tradition, but I like to think that this one will be a little different. For one, it doesn't have the backdrop of hell to really motivate you to avoid giving into temptation. Instead, what I'm after is what are some great temptations that we have in our own lives to do some good things, or to justify to ourselves the doing of something, but that probably won't be in keeping with our highest values. This comes in a thousand different forms of wisdom, but one of them that comes up all the time is that the ends justify the means. That in order to do good, you can reason to yourself that you have to do some bad as well. Of course, we find that if we've built our lives on that bit of wisdom, we will end up just doing a lot of bad things. The problem for me begins and ends with the fact that we're fallible, our perspectives are limited, and we just can't know some of the ramifications of our actions. That's a tough place to be – and I don't have to let you know that, because you're human and you've had to probably navigate through some difficult situations over time.

One temptation that I have overcome mostly in ministry is the desire to do everything, to be present everywhere, to attend to every issue, to attend every committee meeting, to just do everything. That's not because of assumed incompetence from the folks that surround you, but because you want to be needed. I gave that up a few years back because what we do here and in church in general should not be in constant orbit around me and it shouldn't be about meeting my needs. Yet, the temptation is always there. To take something on not because you're the best at it, or you want to do it, or it would help the church, but because you want to be at the center. That's a very pastor-centered temptation, but you get the idea. You can reason yourself there. You can say, but I just want to help do xyz, but if you dig down deeper you realize that it's not the best for the place you serve.

When I look at our texts this morning I'm struck by the temptations that are laid out. In our first text from a legend of the Baal Shem Tov, the great Hasidic master of mysticism, one of the righteous ones is tempted to speak some great and honorable things about God – which is not a bad thing. It's just that we're told that a condition of being righteous and of the Baal Shem Tov's greatness is this person's humility. The temptation is to do something good – to speak truth about God. What a curious temptation. In the Bible, I always imagine the final temptation as being the best. Here Jesus is allegorically offered the kingdoms of the world. Surely he could save them better by ruling them! Surely he has the best ideas, and the best way to improve lives, surely he could be great! He's not wrong, but the temptation is to do things differently than he feels called to do. The temptation is that he could be the only person in the history of the world to wield power in a perfectly just way. What an interesting temptation.

So, I want to briefly outline what I think are three great temptations for us in the here and now – the sorts of things that are tempting, that are not even wrong, but they may be wrong for us.

The first thing that is tempting for us today is to tune out. There's a lot of bad stuff going on in the world today, and we are often powerless to change that. We may be tempted on the 10th letter writing campaign of the month to grow more insular and just concerned with our family or our church. Our families, our churches, they are good things. But we are also called to a practice of attention on the pain of our world.

But attention is also not enough. And so the 2nd temptation is attention without action. We can confuse talking about something with doing something about it. I know I am guilty of this – I am the biggest talker in the world. I spend 15 minutes or so every week doing some talking, like what I'm doing now. But talking and discussing are not the same as acting. We cannot do everything – but we can do something.

Another temptation that we have is to think that we are right about everything. Now, each of you probably has some strongly held beliefs about something, and it's natural to assume that you're right. But having a bit of humility opens the door to conversation, growth, and relationship building. It is impossible to build relationships as someone who is self-righteous or smug. We are called to community. Humility is the only way we can do that.

The final temptation we might have is to do everything ourselves, or to think that we are fine on our own. This temptation is everywhere in society. That we must be self-sufficient, always able to do everything ourselves. This sort of idea blocks us off from meaningful relationship with others and makes it impossible to enjoy the life of flourishing which we and others are called to in this world.

There are of course many temptations for us in this present time. The difficulty is sometimes we are tempted by a good thing, or to have more faith in ourselves than we ought to. Be kind to yourself. You will certainly fail at remaining un-tempted or perfect. But being real about those imperfections and temptations will make you better able to act in the present moment.