



# The New England Church Pulpit

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CHERISHING OUR TEMPTATIONS

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Luke 4.1-13

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from his baptism in the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"*

*Then the devil showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world, saying "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"*

*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

Qur'an 22.52-53

*Never did We send an apostle or a prophet before you, but, when he framed a desire, Satan threw some vanity into his desire. But God will cancel anything vain that Satan throws in, and God will confirm His signs—for God is full of knowledge and wisdom that He may make the suggestions thrown in by Satan but a trial.*

Many of us can sympathize with Oscar Wilde when he said "I can resist anything but temptation. The easiest way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it." Though Mr. Wilde had his tongue firmly planted in his cheek when he made this statement, we understand his sentiment; giving in is a whole lot easier than resisting. Yet, as any Boy Scout will tell you, character is not built on easy solutions.

Temptations are to be cherished. Temptations are to be cherished for what they reveal and the opportunity they provide for purposeful living. Temptations are nothing less than the dark side of our best hopes. They are the underside of our loftiest ambitions. The temptation to cheat on a test, for example, reveals our desire to succeed, to do well, to advance to better things. These are honorable intentions. But what do we learn about the subject matter if we simply record answers to

questions about a subject we've not really learned? The purpose of a test is not to impress the teacher; the purpose of an exam is to show us what we know and what we don't know so we can make improvements. None of us wants our physician or our auto mechanic to have passed their exams because they got all the right answers by cheating; we want them to know their subject to best serve us as a doctor or to keep our car in safe operating condition. The temptation to bypass the learning curve is the dark side of our desire to improve ourselves and yielding to it is like settling for ten dollars when learning how to earn money can give you a lifetime of income.

The test for Jesus is not about staying on God's good side. The temptation for Jesus was not to do something that is wrong; there is nothing wrong with eating, with having power, with trusting, or with being tempted, for that matter. The temptation was to do a good thing for the wrong reason, to turn stones into bread to prove he was someone special, to impress people so they would be his followers. Jesus is the first person tempted by fast food, quips Brett Younger. A round stone becomes a loaf of pumpernickel; a boulder ripens into a cold watermelon; a flat rock becomes a tortilla. (from a sermon *Steps Off the Path* at Good Preacher.com) The temptation is to turn away from the difficult path that will have long-lasting effects and take the easy one for immediate satisfaction. But no one ever made much of a life of integrity by so doing. His temptation was to give in to the populous cry of the crowd who wanted a Messiah, a miracle-worker. He could skip the hard parts of being ridiculed, tortured and murdered in favor of immense popularity that would make everyone want to believe in him. But he demonstrated for us the value of investing in the more difficult journey because therein is found the reward of a meaningful and purposeful life.

The temptation is to do a bad thing for a very good reason, to throw yourself down to prove to yourself and others that there is a God. But God doesn't need to prove that nor do we need to defend that thesis. The temptation is to abandon purpose and destiny by clamoring after the bright lights of immediate success. The dark side of good intentions is the temptation to take the short cut. No athlete ever became good at her game without the arduous and sometimes agonizing journey through building up the body, training the mind, pushing the limits, and practicing day in and day out to achieve the goal. Lance Armstrong found that out the hard way. His achievements were impressive; his intentions were honorable. But ultimately what he built was a house of cards that crumbled over the test of time. Giving in to the easiest way undermines the learning curve and the hard work it takes to be good at whatever we do.

It is tempting to go along with the crowd, to do whatever everyone else is doing, to be part of the majority. But as Mark Twain said: "Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect." It is tempting to side with popular opinion because being in sync with the crowd is comfortable; it makes us think we are right. But such temptations are deceptive. The majority can be powerful and completely wrong. What would have happened in the days of slavery if everyone had gone along with the powerful majority? Civil rights would have been sacrificed on the altar of popularity. This church was part of the Underground Railroad in the mid-1850s; to harbor slaves in their homes was illegal and put them at risk of being jailed or killed themselves. Harboring Jews during the Holocaust risked the same penalty. It was tempting to not rock the boat, and many people succumbed to the temptation. Yet the freedom we celebrate during African-American History Month is due entirely to those who were willing to take the more difficult route, to stand up for justice, to go toe-to-toe challenging unfair laws that discriminated. It cost many their lives, but the blood of these martyrs is the seed of hope for the future.

Today our national Boy Scout organization is faced with a similar challenge. The national program has been adamant in their official stance to exclude boys who would identify themselves as gay. Even so, within that parameter, gay scouts have worked their way to the highest rank of Eagle Scout and some have become adult leaders even though the Scout organization condemned their orientation. It is tempting to yield to the pressure of those who threaten to withhold their millions of dollars of support if the Boy Scouts of America opens its doors to all boys. But here is a chance to take the more difficult route for a higher purpose, to stand on the right side of history, to stand up for justice, to stand against prejudice; here is the opportunity to put into action the words that are said each and every time we pledge allegiance to our flag to be part of a country that offers liberty and justice for all. All. No exceptions. The concept of inclusion is at the core of every major religion of the world including Christianity whose central figure, this Jesus who stood against the temptation to give in to the easy way and got murdered for doing so, taught us by example to include everyone. No exceptions. I am grateful for the leadership of this scout troop and the historical record we have of being inclusive. Within this last year, a new component to this troop has been organized for those young men with special needs; what a great addition to the program. And I'm grateful for the faithful support of this congregation who has for 103 years influenced the scouts of Troop 3 to be open, affirming, just, fair and liberating. What a salvation this would be for a kid who's being bullied and harassed in school to be able to be part of a safe, affirming, challenging program like the Boy Scouts. Isn't that what Scouting is about?

The temptation for the quick fix to avoid the difficulties comes to all of us every day. To opt for short-term gains is done at the peril of long-term achievements and a lifetime of rewarding payback. We want, for example, to avoid pain; who doesn't. It is an honorable goal. But sometimes pain is paradoxically redemptive. We want to take the shortcut around the wilderness of pain so we demand pills that will mask that pain. We are tempted with tranquilizers, sleeping tablets and a faster pace to try to avoid our fears. We are tempted to want an easy way through the process of grief because it's so difficult to bear the loss of a loved one. But medicines that take away our pain also rob us of a process that ultimately takes us to a new level of living. We are tempted to demand of our physicians miracles that are beyond the scope of modern medicine; we threaten legal action if we don't get what we want or if someone makes a mistake. We are tempted to think that we are in control, and whatever we want we can have, yesterday if not sooner. It is the temptation of entitlement and instant gratification that we think is owed to us.

Jesus shows us a better way. It is the way through pain and agony but it is the journey to life. The holy men of other religions have also shown us a better way, the Buddha, Lao-tzu and Muhammad among them. Many others have gone down in history as heroes of the more difficult but more holy way: Abraham Lincoln; Rosa Parks; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Nelson Mandela; Harvey Milk; the Stonewall uprising; The Dalai Lama; Mahatma Gandhi.

When Jesus resisted giving *in* to the easy way *out*, he found himself nourished by all of life's goodness, by that spirit which is at the heart of all that is holy, still in the wilderness but now with a strength and joy that yielding to the dark side cannot provide or sustain. As we continue our Lenten journey, let us take stock in our temptations, cherishing what they tell us about our dreams, our best intentions, our joys and our desires so that we may continue living with hope and the promise that we will do the right thing for the right reason. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann