

# OUR PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH: TEMPTATION

Matthew 4:1-11

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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Today we are beginning a series of Lenten sermons on the theme: "Our Pilgrimage of Faith." This morning the Old Testament and Gospel lessons focus on the matter of temptation.

Now contrary to what we may think, "temptation" does not mean enticement to sin. The Greek word Matthew uses that is translated "to tempt" really means "to test." This "testing" of our faith is not meant to encourage us to sin, but rather to enable us to conquer sin. The testing is not meant to weaken our faith, but rather to strengthen it. The temptations of Jesus tested his resolve to be faithful, even unto death on the cross.

The three temptations Jesus faced were similar to the temptations that we encounter. Jesus' first temptation was to turn the stones into bread. Since Jesus was hungry, this temptation appealed to his physical needs and offered him a way to satisfy those needs. But Jesus rejected the idea of using his powers and gifts to satisfy his hunger.

We, too, are tempted to use our gifts to satisfy our own needs and desires. For example, in this age of e-mail, fax machines, text messaging, and instantaneous satellite communication, we have become impatient with having to wait for anything. Thus we are tempted to indulge in instant self-gratification. Think, for example, of the large number of teenagers who cannot imagine waiting until marriage to have sex, or the young teenagers who lie about their age in order to buy alcohol or see R-rated movies. Our society tempts us to have what we want now, and the prevailing slogan seems to be: "If you want it, why wait?" But Jesus refused to indulge in instant self-gratification, even though he was famished, and that's a good model for us to follow.

Jesus also did not give in to the temptation to use his gifts selfishly. I think we are sometimes tempted to use our money selfishly, to spend all our money on ourselves, instead of helping others in need or giving more to the church. We are tempted to think that we can buy happiness---that the more money we have for ourselves or the more things we own, the happier we will be. In this materialistic culture in which we live, we are constantly tempted to emphasize the material over the spiritual. Jesus calls us back to the biblical perspective that we do not live by bread alone, but by the word of God.

The second temptation Jesus faced was to jump off a pinnacle and ask God to save him. Jesus refused to put God to the test.

We, too, are often tempted to put God to the test of rescuing us when we get ourselves in dangerous situations. One minister I knew was a notoriously bad driver because he seemed to think that God would protect him from having an accident, even if he drove way too fast for the road conditions.

Some of us may also be putting God to the test by doing things that are harmful to our bodies and then expecting God to protect us from harm. Those of us who eat too much, or drink too much, or smoke, are harming our bodies by our actions. We may be tempted to continue these harmful practices and at the same time expect God to keep us from getting heart disease, or alcoholism, or lung cancer. But isn't that putting God to the test? And isn't that what Jesus said we must not do?

Or we may want to continue the harmful practices of polluting our rivers and lakes and the air we breathe, and refusing to take steps to reduce global warming, and then expecting God to rescue us. But can we really expect God to bail us out when we put ourselves in risky or dangerous situations? Do we not need to learn to live responsibly as good stewards, both of our bodies and of our world? Jesus tells us that we are not to put God to the test.

The third temptation Jesus faced was to be given everything in the whole world, but only if he agreed to worship the devil in return. Jesus refused to compromise with evil, insisting that we must worship only God.

We, also, like Faust, may be tempted to sell our souls to the devil---to compromise with evil---in exchange for power, or prestige, or wealth, or favors. We've seen this in recent years in the Enron and World Com scandals. But there are also other ways to compromise with evil. For example, as individuals and as a church, we are often tempted to look the other way when certain groups in our society are persecuted or discriminated against. If we ourselves are not the victims of persecution or discrimination, we are tempted to ignore what happens to others.

You may be familiar with the quotation that came out of World War II from Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemoeller, who was arrested by the Nazis and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. He wrote: "In Germany the Nazis first came for the communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak for me."

Because we are not personally affected, we may be tempted to ignore discrimination that is based on gender, or race, or religion, or sexual orientation. For example, because we are not Jewish, we may be tempted to ignore what happens occasionally to Jewish families who find a Nazi swastika painted on their front door. Or if we are not gay, we may be tempted to ignore what happens to those who are fired from their jobs or tortured or even killed simply because they are gay. But if we do not take a stand and speak out against discrimination in every form, are we not, in fact, compromising with evil?

Consider also the racism that continues to exist in our society. Many of you probably saw the movie "Driving Miss Daisy," which won an Oscar for best picture some years ago. It is a beautiful, heart-warming story about the unlikely friendship that slowly develops between a wealthy, white, Southern, Jewish widow, played by Jessica Tandy, and her black chauffeur, Hoke, played by Morgan Freeman. In a very moving scene toward the end of the film, when they are both old, Miss Daisy breaks all Southern traditions about the barrier that must exist between white and black, between matron and chauffeur, between Jew and Christian. She

turns to Hoke, puts her hand in his, and says to him, "Hoke, you are my best friend."

If we could all get to that point where race, and gender, and economic status, and religious differences, and sexual orientation simply do not matter in our relationships with others, then we would truly be worshiping and serving the God who is the Creator and the Parent of all people. But to the extent that we put up barriers that separate us from any of our sisters and brothers in the human family, are we not compromising with evil?

Jesus was tempted in the same areas in which we are tempted; and because he struggled with those temptations and overcame them, he can help us on our pilgrimage of faith as we struggle with temptation. Jesus can give us the strength to overcome our temptations and to grow in our faith.

Thanks be to God, who sent Jesus to feed us with the Bread of life and to model for us a lifestyle of love.