



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Temptation”

Matthew 4:1-11

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Welcome to Lent. Last week Amy invited us to see these 40 days as a time of training, a time to be honest about ways in which life is hard. This first Sunday in Lent is the next step in our training, a time to acknowledge what tempts us.

I celebrated a birthday last month. It was on a Wednesday. On that Monday, two days before the big day, I was seized by an urge to buy an ice cream pie. So on Monday I purchased one from Johnson’s and put it in the freezer. All day long, intermittently, that pie tempted me, “Ann, Ann, you know where I am ...” By Monday night the pie was front and center in my mind. So after dinner I announced to my spouse that I was going to have a piece. His response was a normal response anyone might make, “But it isn’t even your birthday yet.” “I know,” I said. And right in front of him, right then and there, I cut a substantial piece of that vanilla fudge ice cream pie. I enjoyed every bite, as my spouse looked on, and I didn’t even offer him a piece. Temptation. The allure of sugar in that pie sealed the deal. For me, sugar is a persistent temptation.

How do you experience temptation? How do you deal with that urge or impulse, with that enticing desire, with that itch toward something caloric or unwise or outright wrong? What persistently tempts you?

Temptation takes us plenty of other places besides the refrigerator. Temptations abound. At the mall we are tempted to purchase more than we need or can afford. At school we’re tempted to glance at someone else’s answers. In relationships we are tempted to be right or get even. In the workplace we are tempted to make ourselves look better by making someone else look worse. Moral and ethical temptations abound. We struggle in our online lives. We’re tempted to use technology in ways hurtful to ourselves and others, to express red hot emotions before we cool down, to view images that objectify or abuse.

What we say “yes” to matters, and what we say “no” to matters. Over time our responses to life’s temptations shape us into who we are. Context matters when it comes to temptations because they are so uniquely individual. What tempts me may not tempt you.

My sugar temptation pales in comparison with the scope and magnitude of the temptations Jesus faces. After 40 days and 40 nights without food he is physically famished but spiritually strong. In the wilderness he faces the temptation to do great things, the temptation of power; to feed the hungry, to grow the number of followers, to command all the kingdoms of the world. The tempter invites Jesus to rise to a higher level, if he will just divide his loyalties. Jesus says “no.” He knows he belongs to God, not the tempter. He does well.

But that ice cream pie sure had a hold on me. And truth be told, after I enjoyed a large piece I didn’t actually feel full. It didn’t satisfy my hunger. It didn’t make me feel more complete. If anything, it left me wanting... more.

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

The tempter's voice tells Jesus he isn't enough. I recognize that voice. I am perfectly capable of generating that voice myself. The pie calls my name in a voice I recognize. It's my own voice, telling me I'm not enough, that I need some sugar to be complete. It's a lie every time, but that doesn't stop me from falling for it.

I understand myself better in retrospect. I was coming off a month of sickness, the heavy congestion and coughing many of you have endured. Then I lost my voice for five days, which threatened my work. I felt vulnerable, out of control. OSU's voice clinic came to the rescue and prescribed a steroid. I thought I was back on the road to health, but then the stomach flu hit early on a Sunday morning. I called Amy and mentioned vomiting. She simply said, "This is unambiguous."

I was so ready to feel 'normal' again. But by the time my birthday rolled around my energy still lagged. I was feeling limited and doing my best to ignore that feeling. Ice cream pie tastes good, but it can't satisfy the needs of one's heart and soul because that's not its purpose.

I share this not because my struggle is unique, but because our human struggles are so similar. I have a hunch we each have a vanilla fudge ice cream pie in our lives. We each have something, many somethings, which tempt us, offer to fulfill us, call to us with a lie that sounds so good, if only we will partake.

What's your pie? What tempts you, what beckons, what promises to satisfy but ultimately lets you down when you say 'yes'?

In the wilderness, the tempter tempts with deceptively attractive temptations. Every time, Jesus says "no." Later, when his close friend Peter suggests Jesus can be the Messiah and avoid suffering, Jesus again recognizes the voice of the tempter. "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23). He will not avoid the path leading to the cross.

What we say "yes" to and what we say "no" to matters.

This weekend an estimated 200,000 participants and attendees have gathered in Columbus for the Arnold Sports Festival. International body builders pose and flex. Contestants compete in weightlifting, powerlifting, cross fit, and martial arts. Competitors have intentionally, consistently, trained for strength. The desire to get strong and stay strong has shaped their lives, their diets, habits, schedules. For us, Lent is a time to train, a time of spiritual strengthening, a time to face what tempts us.

Roman Catholic priest and author Richard Rohr describes temptation as "whatever distracts our eye or hand or heart away from God." Rohr goes on to say that the very thing that distracts us from living fully, that causes us anguish and shame also offers a vantage point. Paradoxically, from that vantage point we can "look over the distraction's shoulder" for God! In other words, the persistence of the temptation can actually have the effect of increasing our desire for God.¹

Every temptation offers a choice, an opportunity to breathe in and out and steady our gaze. In our moment of decision we are given a chance to deepen that decision, a moment of freedom in which our desire for God and openness to grace can grow. In other words, this vantage point, this moment of decision, creates space – a sacred space – in which we can say "yes" or "no" to what tempts us. Next time, I hope I breathe in and out, steady my gaze, and remember, as I look over temptation's shoulder for God, that I have a choice.

The temptations we face are an inevitable part of being human. Facing them head on brings awareness and creates a moment of choice we may not have realized we have.

¹ Quote from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation 19.

Maybe we are tempted to persist in behavior that leaves us feeling guilty or uneasy. Who would have thought that the very thing that makes us feel badly about ourselves can become the thing through which God is getting our attention? God uses everything, anything, to bring us to God.

These days we face some communal temptations, to cynicism and defensiveness, to withdrawal and combativeness. As a community we face a temptation to stop talking about things that are important, to take a break from our shared humanity. Life might be easier if we choose to avoid this fundamental work, these hard paths, these ‘crosses’. But life wouldn’t be as honest or as real, either.

Who among us has ever experienced ongoing personal growth without feeling any pain or suffering as an essential part of that growth? Instead of avoiding what tempts us, our job is to face it straight on.

What we say “yes” to and what we say “no” to matters. To whom we say “yes” and “no” matters.

The world’s wisdom says avoid pain; it’s easier. But wisdom not of this world, the wisdom of Jesus, the wisdom of the cross, says God is with us in these wilderness places. God uses everything, even our temptations, to bring us closer to God.

During our days of training in Lent, the tempter may try to get the last word. But the last word belongs to God, who leads us not into temptation, but who delivers us from evil, who delivers us over and over again. Whatever our temptation, we are not alone. Each and every day God nourishes us with the love we need. At this table God nourishes us with a simple meal – bread and cup – and is with us. Whatever our temptation, we are not alone. Amen.