

Lent 1A
St. Matthew 4:1-11
March 5, 2017
St. George's Church Bolton
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Tempting?

Temptation. It is a daily struggle.

I am tempted to make choices that are bad for me, at least health-wise. I am tempted each day to make choices that are spiritually unhealthy for me.

Like many of you, I have adopted a simple Lenten discipline. One of the things I am not doing any more is having several donuts a day. Several months ago, I discovered that Dunkin Donuts would give you a free donut with each cup of coffee you buy, if you are a member of AARP. I have certainly taken advantage of that kindness, and that kindness has taken advantage of me! I really need to stop eating donuts as a matter of course, and have them only occasionally as a treat. Hence my Lenten discipline this year includes a "lay off the donuts Chris." Last Thursday though, the very first day of Lent, following the rule was very hard. There they were, sitting on the well-lit shelf, calling forth to me. And there I was, with the clerk asking me if I wanted something else with my coffee, pondering what the harm might be if I ate one little donut. Therein lies the rub. The rationalizations... *'what harm would one little donut do?' 'I am so hungry, perhaps a little sugar will get me through the rest of the day.'* *'This is not really sinful: it is only a donut.'* *'If I eat it, I will not die, at least not right way.'* So many thoughts. So many reasons. So many excuses.

But this is not the whole story of temptation. Temptation itself is not about sinful donuts or an evil force that lurks outside me, seeking to bring me down. You see, the temptation is a lot more about me than the supposed external evil. What tempts me and how I react to it is lot more revealing than the supposed sin itself.

The old saying is very revealing: *“That there is a devil there can be no doubt. The question is always whether he is trying to get in or out!”*

What tempts me reveals my weaknesses and vulnerability, doesn't it? It says more about me than some donut. The question becomes, why am I so weak that I can not resist a small donut. Why is my faith so small that I cannot muster the willpower to say *no*? What am I to do?

The insidiousness of temptation is revealed in the Gospel this morning, when the devil tempts Jesus by saying, *“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* And when the devil takes him to the pinnacle of the Temple and says much the same thing: *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...”* You see the real temptation here is not about turning stones into bread or proving himself also by jumping from a great height that would kill someone else. The *real temptation* here is to get Jesus to doubt himself and think that he needs to prove himself to others. The key words are, *“If you are the Son of God...”* Doesn't Jesus know who he is? Does he need to prove himself by showing off? OR does Jesus prove himself by showing his compassion healing the sick and comforting the grieving? Which does God choose, do you suppose?

So when I am tempted, the question isn't really the bad choice or evil tempting me, ranging from something as seemingly as innocuous as eating a donut to the more serious indicators of character deficit such as taking things that don't belong to me, or cheating, or coveting or committing adultery because the opportunity to do so is there and no one will know about it. *(Trust me, it is always true that there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed, even if it takes until the last day when you stand before God for judgement, and trust me, our weaknesses and misconduct are far more transparent than we think they are, and our sins reveal our real character to others around us, despite our thinking that they are hidden from the view of others!)* The real question posed by sin and temptation says a lot more about me: *'Chris, if you are a Christian, show me your strength to resist the evil in your life.'* My behavior speaks to my faith and the rest of the Christian community around me. What does my behavior say? Is it a witness for Christ, or a witness for hedonism? Those who are dishonest in a little, are dishonest in much, in greater responsibilities given to us. Those who are dishonest with themselves, will find it easy to be dishonest with others. Those who succumb to small temptations which should easily be resisted, will succumb too easily to far greater temptations. So giving into small temptations like a donut, may not be such a small matter as it initially seemed.

I am reminded here of another passage in the same Gospel this morning: [from Matthew 26:42] "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Indeed, I am made to be aware of my real weakness which is revealed by what small things tempt me away from the right path to health and wellness, physically and spiritually. What if something really big came along? What would I do?

The key advice in this passage is a small phrase that might pass our notice: *“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.”* Giving voice to a prayer, at the very least, internally, silently, is a powerful tool to help you resist the temptation. It reminds us who we really are, and *whose* we are, and who is on our side to help strengthen us. More importantly, notice the use of the verb in this sentence: it does not say prayer *may* help you avoid temptation. It says that it *will* help you do so!

We are not alone, nor are we without help as we struggle with our own weakness and spiritual vulnerability. When I notice that I feel physically weak, the first thing that comes to mind is that perhaps it is time for me to start exercising again to build up my strength. I noticed that recently as I spent a day or so lifting a lot of boxes to move them to a storage facility. I noticed my physical weakness again when on another day I was busy cleaning out my storage unit in the “basement” of my building. I resolved to do something about it, realizing that such weakness only gets worse from here when it is ignored. My physical wellness depends on my efforts.

This leads me to ponder if the same isn't true when it comes to my spiritual wellness. Is there a need for some exercise there also? You bet. And Lent is a time to get serious about doing some spiritual exercises! What might that look like, do you think?

Lent is a season for spiritual exercise, and not neglect. Adopting a spiritual discipline for the season, and hopefully beyond Easter, is a way to flex and strengthen those spiritual muscles. Resisting temptation in the little things will help prepare you when you face those greater temptations in life.

God knows our weaknesses and vulnerability and seeks to help us make the right choices. Consider the words of St. Paul in First Corinthians 10:13 *"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."* I trust these words, and have found them to be true, even though I have often succumbed to temptations great and small.

Then there are the words of the Lord's prayer which we recite regularly. *"Lead us not into temptation."* Or the more modern translation, *"Save us from the time of trial."* I like the more modern version of these words in my private prayers as I can't imagine God leading me into temptation, but rather out of it, so my plea is for God's help in resisting temptation. God, do not let me be led into succumbing to the temptations to which I am exposed, but give me the strength to affirm that I am a Christian in the face of my own weakness and folly.

Jesus, awaiting his betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:46, said to his tired disciples: *"Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."* We are not always alert or awake to the temptations which are placed right in front of us. With sleepy eyes, we rub them and suppose that we will ride out the storm of temptation, allowing its waves to overtake us as we drown in our follies. But prayer is a strong tool to overcome our fears in the face of high winds pushing us to succumb to sin. The waves of rationalizations will not overtake us, no matter how high they that rise above common sense. The heavy storm will subside if we trust in God and ask for help to get through our trials.

Of the greatest comfort to me, and I hope you, is the knowledge that God is not some pure being who has no awareness of what it is like to face temptation. As he wandered in the wilderness, Jesus tasted it in its most seductive forms as we witness this morning. *“He was tempted as we are, yet did not sin.”* [Hebrews 4:15]

You can take that one to the bank. God knows and understands what we face, and has not left us alone nor without the tools to overcome the temptation. You and I walk together this Lent as we struggle to be Christians and strengthen ourselves to resist the temptations that assault us. As our Lord said to his disciples, so I say to you, *“Awake! Get up and pray, so that you will not fall into temptation.”* AMEN