

TEMPTATION: WHY ARE WE SO SUSCEPTIBLE?

I want to speak about a temptation Christ was exposed to which is not directly referred to in any Scripture passage. Let me begin with something from today's gospel. "The devil left him—for a time." That is how today's gospel passage from Saint Luke ends. The devil left Jesus for a time. Meaning? The devil will be back. And we get that. We understand that temptations are not over and done. Temptations are a part of life and they were a part of Jesus' life too. And they had to be real for him because they are real for us. If Jesus couldn't really be tempted than he wouldn't truly be one of us because we are tempted—a lot.

I don't often do this but I went to the actual Greek text to look at what words were there in this passage. It is interesting. You know how from time to time Jesus would refer to "His hour?" He would sometimes say "My hour has not yet come," as he does to his mother at the wedding in Cana where he changes water into choice wine. Or in other places the Scriptures say that "Jesus passed through their midst because his hour had not yet come." Well that is the same expression that is used in this passage. The devil left Jesus to await Jesus' hour. Why then? Why wait until then? Because Jesus will be at his most vulnerable then. You know how susceptible you are when you are really tired or really frustrated or really discouraged and you begin to think that certain things don't matter? What difference does it make? Or that it is all just too much?

Jesus had days like that especially at the end. If you listen to what he says to his apostles at the Last Supper as it is described in John's Gospel, Jesus pours out his heart to his men. "I pray that all will be one as you Father are in me and I in you, that they will be one in us." Jesus is all about unity, the beginning of the new creation, a new community bound together by faith in him and love for God and others. And it is precisely one of those closest to him who betrays him. Where is Jesus most vulnerable? Not in his own inner strength, not in his relationship with his Father, not in his understanding of who he is and why he has come to earth. The devil will not be able to sway him on any of those fronts. That's the approach he tries in the desert. That effort goes nowhere.

No, where Jesus is vulnerable is where he loves, with those whom he has chosen, with those closest to him. With one of his own. With one of the Twelve. And Luke says that the devil entered into Judas as he went out to betray Jesus for some money. Not even a lot of money. The devil cannot enter into us without our letting him. The devil always needs entre. Possession is not accomplished by entering into the soul of a person against their will. The devil is able to hijack a body—for a time, and put that person through great pains always with a view not to destroy the occupied person so much as to destroy the faith of those who love that person.

They're the ones that are most vulnerable. The most effective temptations of the evil one come to us like they came to Jesus where we are most vulnerable. Where we love. They come indirectly.

Think about it. We will all receive some temptations around our Lenten penitential practices. We will resist most of them and probably falter on occasion. But they're not the big temptations. They're not the temptations that put us at risk. No, the temptations that put us at risk, those temptations come in terms of our relationships—with our spouses and children and parents and siblings, in the extended family, sometimes in the workplace or in our community. Sometimes in our relationship with our own self. We are vulnerable there. Sometimes very vulnerable. Why does God allow such temptations? The answer is a bit surprising. God allows such temptations, even those that put us very much at risk, because it is precisely at those moments that his grace flows abundantly. That was the case with Jesus in his hour and it is the case with us in our hour too.

Temptations lead us into sin, we think. But in actuality temptations are pathways to grace and thus pathways to virtue. Facing temptations is what makes us the Lord's saints, his holy ones. Without temptations, without moments of testing, we do not access the grace that truly transforms us. But we do have to choose the grace in the moment. Choosing the grace affirms our freedom and that liberates us from the forces of sin and compulsion. And so, instead of being impatient with spouse we grow more patient. Instead of judging and criticizing our children we encourage and build up. Instead of selling out at work we choose the path of integrity even though it sometimes costs us. Instead of giving up on our own, we choose to hang in there no matter what happens and we grow in faithfulness. Instead of giving into the lustfulness that visits from time to time we gently move it aside and allow God's grace of true chastity to enter and our hearts begin to be changed. Instead of condemning ourselves we reaffirm our conviction that we are children of God despite sin.

We don't like to be tempted because we know they put us at risk and we give in sometimes. We are not focusing our attention on what is right there is such moments. The grace which the Holy Spirit pours into us is always available but must be opted for. If we look for it we will always find it and in sufficient abundance to overcome the power of anything that evil can propose. But we have to believe, we have to look for and we have to choose. That, my friends, is what Lent is about. The penitential practices are but reminders of the deeper reality at play. And Lent leads to Easter and Easter is all about the victory of hope and faith and love. Do not be afraid to undergo temptation. You are never alone.