

2-22-26 sermon

Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7. Matthew 4.1-11

Oscar Wilde famously quipped, “I can resist everything except temptation.”

In his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton has this advice for Mr. Gray: “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.” Wilde frequently commented on the repressive character of Victorian England, and while we may reject the advice Lord Wotton gave Mr Gray as hedonism, there is an element of truth to what he said. Because when something is denied to us, it often becomes more attractive to us than it, perhaps, warrants. If someone tells us we can’t have something, it’s rare that we respond, “OK.” Usually our first response is, “Why not?” I suspect our young disciples know something about this. Perhaps you’ve asked for something for your birthday and your parents say, “Maybe when you’re older.” Do you say, “OK”? Or do you say, “Why can’t I have it now?” Or when your mum or your dad says, “Stop annoying your brother.” Or, “stop poking your sister.” Do you stop straight away? Or when they say, ‘stop,’ does that make you want to do it even more? I’m sure all of *our* young disciples stop at the first time of asking!

Now, that impulse is deep within all of us. Don’t believe me? Let’s try a little experiment. Don’t think about oranges. I forbid you to think about oranges. Stop thinking about oranges! Who’s thinking about oranges? Anyone thinking about a different fruit? Who’s trying to resist the temptation by thinking of something that’s *like* an orange, but *isn’t* an orange? Some of us are very good at that game. “I *know* I shouldn’t do *this*, so I’m just going to do *that* instead.” It’s *almost* the same as doing what I want to do, *and* it eases my conscience. Anyone familiar with that little dance? Once something is denied to us – either by someone else, or by our own choice, how often does that something begin to grow in our imagination? How much time do we spend thinking about it? How much time do we spend trying to justify why it should, in fact, *not* be denied to us?

If you’re more of a Tolkien person than a Wilde person, perhaps this scene at the beginning of the Fellowship of the Ring will resonate. After Bilbo uses the Ring of Power to sneak away from his party and Gandalf meets him back at Bag End, he asks Bilbo if he’s going to leave the Ring behind when he leaves the Shire. “Yes, it’s there,” says Bilbo, “in an envelope on the mantelpiece. No wait, it’s here, in my pocket. Isn’t that odd? But after all, why not? Why shouldn’t I keep it?” “I think you should leave the Ring behind Bilbo. Is that so hard?” “Well, no. And yes. Now it comes to it, I don’t feel like parting with it. It came to me. It’s mine... My own... my precious...”

We may not hold the Ring of Power, but there may well be something – or somethings – that hold power over us. Something that someone – perhaps even ourselves – has denied to us

Because it's bad for our health – physical or mental. Or harmful to ourselves or others in some other way. We may even know that to be true and yet, somehow, in the face of temptation we still find ourselves saying, “But after all, why not? Why shouldn't I?” So perhaps Sir Henry was right: “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.”

At the very beginning of the grand narrative of scripture, the LORD God formed the first human from the dust of the ground, as we were reminded on Ash Wednesday, and then placed the adam in a garden. God commanded him, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Was this the first instance of, “Don't think about oranges?” Or, in popular imagination, “Don't think about apples?” Perhaps. Perhaps not. What we do know – even though we skipped over the account of the creation of the first woman, and the beautiful description of their life, ‘they were naked and *unashamed*’ – is that the first humans have been thinking about that tree. When the serpent begins a conversation with them, the woman describes the tree as being “in the middle of the garden,” Suggesting that they have been to check out the tree whose fruit was forbidden to them. And maybe one of them reached out to touch it, and the other cried out, “stop!” Because the woman explains to the serpent that the LORD God told them not to eat *or touch it*, which is not what God said. Maybe that first couple had had conversations about the fruit of that tree and somehow over the course of time their conversation shaped their recall of what God had actually said. Maybe.

Did you notice how the serpent began the conversation? Not with a direct temptation – “Go on, eat it. You know you want to. I've seen your longing gaze on that delicious fruit. I've seen you reach out, then pull back. Go on. Take a little bite. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.” No, the serpent was more subtle than that. “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from *any* tree in the garden?’” Perhaps the serpent's tone suggesting, “How unfair is God to deny you all that fruit? The woman quickly corrects him, as we heard, but not with the description that God gave the man before she was even formed – “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” – but as “the tree in the middle of the garden.” Oh – and we can't eat it or touch it, or we'll *die*.” “You will not die,” responds the serpent, “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

If this was a movie we were streaming, we might hit ‘pause’ and yell at the screen, “Don't do it! The serpent's lying to you!” But is it? After all, when they eventually do reach for and finally take the fruit, they *don't* die. At least, physically. Something died in them, for sure. Because they were naked and unashamed until this moment, but now they *realize* they're naked – and apparently feel shame for the first time, trying to use fig leaves to cover themselves. One might argue that it is here, in this moment, that purity culture – the over-sexualizing of human bodies – begins. What died in them was being comfortable in their own skin.

What died in them was the mutuality of their relationship. What died in them was the freedom and joy they found in their relationship with their Creator. Who used to walk with

them in the cool of the evening. But no longer. Because they were naked and ashamed. “You will be like God...” the serpent said. But they already were. For they were created in the very image of God. Made for relationship with God, and with each other.

How are we to best understand this story? Walter Brueggemann has this advice for preachers: “The interpreter of this text may do best to strike a bargain with their listeners by simply telling the story and nothing more. The words are laden with rich suggestion so that it is likely that any interpretive attempt will detract from rather than enhance the artistry of the narrative.” Well, that ship has already sailed! Perhaps we can begin with an important distinction that we often fail to make. If you look at your bulletin, you’ll see this text introduced as being from the Hebrew Bible. I grew up in a tradition that would call this a story from the Old Testament. Because there’s a New Testament – written by Christians, and there’s the “Old” Testament – written by Jewish authors. And while it’s still in the Bible, the *Old* Testament is not as important as the New Testament, because the Story moved on with Jesus and the Church, and left the Jewish people behind. This is called ‘supersessionism’ and is rightly frowned upon. So, we call it the Hebrew Bible. But I’ve come to wonder whether that’s accurate. Because when the Church approaches the sacred text of the Jewish people, we approach it in a very different manner, because we *have* the New Testament. So we read the Hebrew bible through the lens of the Christian Testament, which will profoundly change the way we read the Hebrew Bible. And therefore, it may be more accurate – and honest – for us to call it, the Old Testament. This story provides a good example of why that’s so.

Paul’s writings include this statement: “For as all in Adam die, so all will be made alive in Christ,” which we then read into this story, and conclude that except for Adam, humans were supposed to live forever, but because he succumbed to temptation, we will all suffer death. Yet there is nothing in this story – taken on its own merits – that suggests that. There’s no indication that humans would be immortal – if that was the case, surely a finite earth would be incapable of supporting an infinite human population? One way of reading this story is that death would come to everyone eventually, but if humans violated the *only* prohibition their Creator established, “in the *day* you eat of it, you will die.” Before your time.

*Death* is not the main point of God’s statement to the first human. The main point is that the entirety of the Garden is available for food! With just this one exception, which is a summons to be God’s creatures, to live in God’s world on God’s terms. And this ‘tree of knowledge’? Found only here in scripture. So – an abundance and variety of options for food, with a single prohibition! Which begs the question, “Why? Why eat it?” One answer is because that first couple engaged in theology! Instead of talking *to* God, or *with* God about what the serpent had to say, they talked *about* God. Daring to speak *for* God. “God said we can’t *touch* the fruit or we’ll die.”

The prohibition appeared to be a *given* – the Creator gave it to us. But the serpent makes it sound like an *option* – “You will not die!” And so the *serpent* makes death the primary

agenda, rather than the gracious and abundant life God offered the humans. The serpent invites the humans to deny their identity, as unique among all the creatures, because they were made in the image of God. In relationship *with* God. Enjoying life in God's world, on God's terms. But they listened to the serpent's distorted representation of God, and violated the single prohibition. But then the surprising thing happened: they *didn't die!* The text gives no explanation as to why, and I'm not going to speculate! But this primal story sets the stage for every story that will follow, and that is that humanity refuses to accept that we are creatures. To deny our identity as those made in the image of God, to refuse to live in God's world on God's terms. Until the Second Adam – Jesus – faces his own temptation, which mirror that of the first humans, and of God's people Israel after God liberates them from slavery in Egypt. And that is to deny his identity. For immediately after hearing the voice from heaven say, at his baptism, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And each of the three temptations begins in a similar vein to that of the serpent's in the garden: "Did God *really* say you're the Son, the beloved, in whom God is pleased? If you *are* the Son, then just do this..." And for each of the temptations, Jesus has the same response: "It is written..." "God has said..." The devil invites Jesus to deny his identity as the beloved Son, and each time, Jesus refuses to entertain even the idea of it.

All of us experience temptation. It's why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation..." And while our temptations may vary, as do the consequences for yielding to them, what those temptations have in common is the invitation to deny our identity as those not only made in the image of God, but as the beloved of God. As well as the temptation to talk *about* God, rather than *to* or *with* God about whatever the temptation involves.

Friends, you are the beloved of God. We are made in the image of God – created for relationship with God and with each other. We live in a world of abundance, and not scarcity. And so, when the serpent whispers, "After all, why not? Why shouldn't you?" instead of debating the merits of the serpent's suggestion, or telling ourselves, "I won't do *that*, but maybe it's alright to do *this*," perhaps we can take a leaf out of Martin Luther's book, and defiantly say, "I am baptized." "I am the beloved of God." And if you're like me, you probably need to find someone else to remind you of that truth. So that instead of yielding to sin, we yield to the love of God, and walk in the freedom that we all long for.

May it be so.