

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Lent 1, Matthew 4:1-11 *Wilderness Temptations*

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It happens on Sundays, at funerals, at weddings, at devotional services . . . We get to THAT part of the Lord's Prayer, the part where, if I'm alone, I say "Forgive us our debts" but if I'm leading a service I get quiet after the "Forgive us" part to leave space for people from various traditions to say what's meaningful to them—sins, trespasses, debts, etc. I like the diversity.

That being said, I must confess that I'm not too eager to begin dealing with another alteration in the Lord's Prayer. Have you heard about this change on the news or from any of your Catholic friends? It's a change from "Lead us not into a temptation" to "Do not let us fall into temptation." It's a change being championed by Pope Francis. The Pope's explanation of the change hit news outlets last year; here is how the story was reported on *The Guardian*.

[Lead us not into temptation.] ". . . is not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation," [the Pope] told Italian TV. "I am the one who falls. It's not him pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen.

"A father doesn't do that; a father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation – that's his department."

The article continues . . .

[On the other hand] some have expressed concern about changes to the wording. Meredith Warren, a lecturer in biblical and religious studies at Sheffield University, said: "This new version of the Lord's Prayer tries to avoid implying that God has some hand in evil.

"But in doing so the pope not only overlooks the many biblical examples where God works with the devil to tempt his followers and even his own son. The new version actually goes against the plain meaning of the Greek of the gospel text."¹

Indeed, this morning's passage about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is that passage where God appears to work with the devil to tempt his own son. "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." That's a straight-forward statement that it's God who is leading Jesus to be tempted. It's a perspective that resonates with some folks because if temptation comes from God, it has a deeper purpose than mere suffering. And yet, in talking with some of you, I have learned that the Pope's perspective resonates with you because you don't believe in a God who would lead you into temptation. Your faith is strengthened by the Pope's perspective.

It is this difference in the interpretations of the line about temptation that bring us back to our topic for today—which is, well, temptation. Perhaps one of the greatest temptations we all face is the temptation to judge and condemn the beliefs and perspectives of others when those beliefs and perspectives are different than our own. These two perspectives on the Lord's Prayer are but one example that help us to understand why it is unwise to issue forth definitive judgments about the meanings of such things or condemn those with a different interpretation.

Indeed, both perspectives on this portion of the Lord's Prayer can be defended scripturally. They both grow out of solid, well-researched, theological constructs. A person who believes that God does tempt people could

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/06/led-not-into-temptation-pope-approves-change-to-lords-prayer>

easily use scripture and theological scholarship to defend that view and someone who doesn't believe God tempts us could do the same. In other words, as with any good debate endeavor, a well-stated, evidence-based argument could go either way.

This is why I refuse to engage in games of Biblical weaponry—you know, when people use the Bible as a weapon to attack another person's perspective. Of course I use scripture to shape my mind, heart, and life. And, I love studying scripture and exploring it with other people. But, the truth of the matter is that nearly any passage in the Bible can be lifted up and taken out of context to be used as a basis of judgment and condemnation of another person. And, I'm not gonna lie, it can be awfully hard to resist the temptation to do that, especially when baited to do so, which is something that happens to pastors when we get outside the safety of our own flock and enter the wilderness of the secular world. (I really do not like the wilderness of the secular world. I would much rather be right here with all of you . . . but I digress.)

In my twenty years of ministry I have watched this tendency to attack people whose interpretations are different than our own grow stronger. It seems that now the need to be right is more pervasive than ever. It seems that now considering multiple points of view is seen as frivolous. It seems that now listening to people with different viewpoints is considered to be a sign of weakness. It seems that now computer algorithms we know nothing about bait us and bombard us with information designed to strengthen our bias and demonize the other. It seems like now, more than ever, it is so hard to resist the temptation of clinging fiercely to our perspectives, opinions, and biases because we are being led to believe that this kind of self-righteousness can define us and save us when really, nothing could be further from the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, friends, we are being tempted in the wilderness. As we heard in today's scripture passage, while Jesus was in the wilderness those forty days, he was tempted by three things that can be summarized as—physical satisfaction, ego stroking, and material wealth. The need to be right falls into the second temptation—the part about ego stroking. Self-righteousness, the need to always be right, is ego boosting run amuck. Sure, it's tempting to surround ourselves with all of the people and things and news that boost our egos and support our status quo. I get that. It feels safe. I like feeling safe. And yet, it's a false security, isn't it? The truth is that there is a lot of truth to be found outside of our comfort zones. But, the temptation is to stay in our comfort zone where we are always right.

And yet, giving into the temptation to stay in our comfort zone of self-righteousness, the places where we are the experts and know what's best, can separate us from the very people who have the most to teach us. Self-righteousness is a huge stumbling block when it comes to loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

The best, yet somewhat inappropriate, example of this from my own life has to do with outhouses. Please forgive the graphic nature of the illustration but I can't think of a better one. When I was in Uganda with the Sutherlands a couple of years ago, which was a total wilderness experience for me, I was exposed to the reality of squat toilets. I found them appalling and my heart went out to the billions of people on the face of the earth, people I assumed were all living in poverty, who were forced to use squat toilets. Some of my happiest moments in Africa were when we came across outhouses that had pedestal toilets with seats. It's the smallest things that bring joy during our wilderness times.

Fast forward about six months and Jesse and I are at Yellowstone National Park. We stop at a parking area for the West Thumb Geyser Basin where there is a row of outhouses. And, you are not even going to believe this, right there beside an outhouse with the "right" kind of toilet is an outhouse with a graphic of someone using a squat toilet. Amazed and appalled, I looked inside and sure enough, there was a squat toilet. I was floored!

As it turns out, there are people, people from other parts of the world who are wealthy enough to travel to Yellowstone National Park, who prefer squat toilets. A brief exploration on the topic provided evidence that

said toilets can indeed, be far more sanitary and healthy than the toilets to which we have become accustomed. And, I've got to admit, from a housekeeping perspective, there's a lot less of it to clean.

I spent days in Africa feeling sorry for the millions of residents of Uganda who were forced, day in and day out, to use a squat toilet. I considered ways to support bringing better sanitation, i.e. pedestal toilets, to some of the schools we visited. As it turns out, I had fallen into the temptation of believing that my way, or my preference, was the right way, or the right preference. I never asked any of the amazing people I met there how they felt about squat toilets. I just looked at their world from the perspective of the status quo of mine and figured they couldn't afford the luxury I had. I tell ya, it was a humbling moment in the parking area of the West Thumb Geyser Basin when I learned that what I had was not necessarily what other people wanted, that my ideal wasn't, well, always ideal.

If I ever go back to Uganda, I'm going to be weird and try to have a conversation about toilets. I'm going to try to learn from someone who lives and moves and has their being in a world that is a wilderness to me. I'm going to try to leave my self-righteousness and assumptions at baggage claim and not give into the temptation to lean on my own understanding. In a word, I will try to be humble.

Because, the best resistance to the temptation towards self-righteousness is humility. The best example we have for humility is Jesus in these forty days of wilderness temptation. Now let's be clear, humility does not mean passively accepting information you know to be false; Jesus argues in the wilderness. Humility does not mean staying silent about injustice and oppression; Jesus quotes scripture in the wilderness. Humility does not mean "going along to get along" when the behaviors with which we are going along are clearly sinful; Jesus refuses to make dangerous alliances in the wilderness.

The humility Jesus displays during his wilderness temptation is a quality he exudes throughout his ministry. This morning I think particularly of when he teaches his followers the Lord's Prayer—the prayer that got all of this started this morning. But, I don't want to talk about the debts and debtors part and I don't want to talk about the being led into temptation part. I want to talk about the "Thy will be done part" because the "Thy will be done" part is the ultimate statement of humbly loving the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of mind and loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

Because that's the litmus test, right? These passages invite us to consider if what we're doing, saying, interpreting, thinking or believing reveal a love of God and neighbor? They invite us to consider if we are valuing being right over being loving? They invite us to consider what it really looks like to resist the temptation of self-righteousness and live a life of humble service to God and one another.