



Temptation

Text: Luke 4: 1 – 13

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I need to begin this brief communion meditation with two disclaimers.

The first is that many of you may experience this meditation as old fashioned, harsh and judgmental. Well, what can I say? It's Lent, and that's kind of how this season works. I remember a colleague who was a Roman Catholic priest once telling his congregants: "If you don't like this sermon, talk to God not me – because I don't make this stuff up. It's in the Bible". I don't want to be quite that presumptuous – not *quite*. But the truth is that the Lenten readings do tend to be difficult, and the preacher who sugar-coats them is unfair both to his congregants and to the texts.

The second disclaimer is that, even if Adam Giambrone had never been born, we would still need to deal with the story of the temptation of Jesus this morning. It comes up in the annual cycle of readings for the first Sunday of Lent every single year, and the only real way to avoid it is to stay home from church that day. And don't think I wasn't tempted.

Having said that, I'm fed up to the teeth with Adam Giambrone, Tiger Woods, John Kerry, Bill Clinton, Elliott Spitzer, Silvio Berlusconi and every other over-hormoned, under-ethiced public figure who thinks his status as "great man" entitles him to sleep with every piece of female flesh he can get his hands on, and then lie about it to his partner, to his children, and to the public. Enough, already. It's not OK, and it's time for people of decency to stop equivocating and making excuses for these people; it's time for the people who pay for their inflated and exaggerated life style to say, "No more, buddy".

Now, let's clarify a couple of things.

Firstly, it's important to say that the wrong-doings of these characters, and so many others like them, are not ultimately sexual in nature. It's impossible to ignore the fact, of course, that these guys are all, well, guys, and as such as subject to the surges of testosterone that tend to characterize the male human journey. Fair enough, I suppose, but here's a news flash: they are not the first men in history to feel horny. Nor are they the first to express that feeling in ways that are profoundly hurtful to others; it's been done before, and it will, sadly, be done again. Dalliances with prostitutes, girl-friends, and other sundry paramours are as old as time itself, and while taudry and shameful, these events are, in the cases I've named, more accurately thought of as symptoms of the sin, rather than the sin itself.

Similarly, it oversimplifies the problem to claim, as many commentators have, that the real problem is simply that these people lied about their indiscretions. It's frankly not clear to me how Bill Clinton's love affair with a cigar would be any more presidential if we had all known about it at a press conference moments after it

happened. Public figures are no more obligated to share details of their intimate lives with the chattering masses than are any of the rest of us. And if every person who had ever deceived their spouse on a matter of importance were precluded from leadership in our society, the pool from which we would choose our leaders would be a even more shallow than it is already. This is not to say that such deceptions are morally or ethically acceptable – they are not. They are usually hurtful, and therefore wrong. It is to say, however, that the allegation that young Mr. Giambone chose to lie to his girlfriend, while sad, is not really what lies at the core of his, or our, problem.

So if it's not sex and it's not lies, what really does lie at the core of the problem for these men, and, by extension, for us all? Well, simply stated, it's this: these guys all seem to think that because of their stature and status, they are somehow above the normal laws, conventions and covenants that govern the rest of humanity. Whether you label the attitude "pride" – a word that has transmogrified from a vice to a virtue during my lifetime -- or whether you label it arrogance, or perhaps most accurately entitlement, the operant mindset that lies behind this behaviour – the screwing and the lying and the rest – is the notion that somehow "I am above it all. I can get away with this, because I have money, or power, or brains, or image consultants, or whatever. And not only can I get away with it, I deserve it. Look at all I'm doing for society, Look at all the money I'm making. Look at all that I am, and all that I do – no one can stop me". That attitude, and all the actions that spring from it, is at the core of what it means to be tempted, and to fail.

The story of the temptation of Jesus, as Luke relates it, is a fascinating one. It's cloaked in the ancient imagery of its time, but the story it tells is utterly timeless. This young rabbi from Nazareth has just been through an incredibly heady time. He had gone out into the wilderness to be baptized by this colourful and charismatic figure John the Baptist, but the baptism had not been the quiet or private fair he had perhaps imagined. Firstly, John himself picks Jesus out of the crowd, and declares to his own followers: "I baptize you just with water, but that guy there, who is coming after me, is more powerful than I will ever be – in fact, I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals." Then Luke continues the story this way: "While Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven and said 'You are my son. Today I have fathered you'. That's pretty powerful stuff; Jesus had experienced himself to be chosen out of the crowd, named greater than the greatest living prophet of his time, and then anointed by the voice of God himself as the special, chosen child. And what is the very next thing that happens in Jesus' life, according to Luke? The very next thing that happens is that Jesus is tempted, severely tempted, to abuse the power and the status that has just been conferred on him.

Because the story is cloaked in ancient mythology of talking demons, it's easy to miss the point of it today. But look what happens. Straight from this pinnacle moment, Jesus experiences himself to be powerfully tested to misuse this new, special status he has been gifted with. For Jesus, the temptation is not sexual, and you can make of that what you like. But the temptations are just as powerful, and even more classic perhaps, than sex. Firstly, Jesus is tempted to use his status to get a bunch of stuff for himself – turn this stone into bread, says the evil one. You're the son of God – you can have whatever you want. Secondly, Jesus wants – really *wants* (because that's what temptation means after all) – Jesus wants to use his status as God's son to claim political power. After all, he thinks, just imagine all the good I could do. It's a powerful temptation indeed – to stand up in the assemblies of power, and have the spotlights come on, and people falling at your feet. And finally,

Jesus is tempted to demonstrate that even the laws of nature don't apply to him – “throw yourself off the temple” says the Evil One – “God's angels will catch you”. It's amazing how unlimited are the bounds of megalomania – amazing how much those who think they're special think they can get away with. And Jesus wondered, for a moment at least, whether he could get away with it – he was tempted, we're told. This wasn't a walk in the park – this was a serious confrontation of someone who knew he was special, with the idea of using that special status to benefit himself, to lift himself above normal humanity, to be a “big man in town”.

And Jesus, famously, tells the tempter to go to hell.

There have been times, I'm sure, when every single one of the people I've named earlier in this sermon, and every single person unnamed but equally guilty, has wished that they'd told the tempter to go to hell. But they didn't. They said “yes”, not “no”, when confronted with the temptation to use their special status, their prestige, their connections to violate principles they knew full well were, quite simply wrong. And, as a result, what could have been sterling careers in the public spotlight have taken upon themselves a tarnish that can never, really, be fully eradicated, and what could have been lives filled with meaning and purpose assume a blemish, a scar that never really quite goes away, regardless of whatever other good they may do.

Which brings us, of course, to the question of forgiveness, and particularly to the question: “isn't forgiveness possible for people like these, who do so much good in other parts of their lives, but make one very public mistake? Shouldn't the public forgive and forget?”

As a purveyor of the Christian Gospel, far be it from me to speak against the power and the wonder of forgiveness. However, it needs to be said that, in the kinds of situations we're talking about here, in situations where wrong-doing is so solidly rooted in an attitude of entitlement, even the question of forgiveness is trickier than it may seem.

Last week, I heard, on CBC radio, Toronto Councillor Howard Moscoe arguing for the speedy rehabilitation of Adam Giambone in public perception. In one sense, at least, it was nice to hear Moscoe defending Giambone; he's likely a very talented and capable man who doesn't fully deserve the public lynching he's received. But Moscoe's advocacy for his friend was based on two very shaky premises. The first was the notion that “everybody's doing it”; Moscoe insists he knows thousands of people in public life, and that the kind of behaviour we have seen in young Adam is not especially unusual or out-of-the-ordinary for the people he knows. I hope that's untrue; if it's not, and given that you usually know a lot about a person by the people he calls friends, I'm not sure I would want to be included in Howard Moscoe's circle. I can only hope he is wrong about this. But his second argument, even though it sounds more benevolent, was just as distressing. Moscoe argued, with some conviction, that because Adam Giambone is such a fine young man in so many ways, and has so many redeeming virtues in his life, he *deserves* to be forgiven for this one indiscretion in his life. I've heard other people make similar arguments, many times, on behalf of Tiger Woods or Bill Clinton; finding people to make a similar case for Silvio Berlusconi might be a tougher task, but that's another story.

This idea that someone *deserves* forgiveness for one aspect of their life because of what they do in another aspect is a curious one – and it's the natural result of this notion of entitlement, of special privilege, run amok. Not only, you see, do members of this privileged class believe they are entitled to their mistresses, their

deceptions, their skeletons in the closet (as Moscoe kept calling them), the *really* arrogant amongst them believe they are also entitled to forgiveness when those skeletons break loose and they get caught in their indiscretions. Forgiveness, for these people, becomes one more thing to which they are entitled – one more right of membership in the club, one more sign of their special status in the world.

But that's not how forgiveness works. On the first Sunday of Lent each year, when we preach on the temptations of Jesus, we also celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion – the church's central sign of the forgiveness which is ours through the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus. There are many ways to understand communion, but one of the central understandings has always been that the supper, to which we are invited by God's grace and at which we are served by God's love, is a reminder that forgiveness is always a gift, never an entitlement. At this table, we are given tokens of the body and blood of Jesus to remind us that it is by grace alone – not by anything that we can ever earn or achieve, that we are made whole by God and by each other. Forgiveness is one of the few things in life we can never earn. When forgiveness is real, it is always a free gift bestowed upon us by the ones we have hurt. That's the only way it can work. If I hurt you, there's nothing I can do to make that OK; the power of redemption, of restoration, of forgiveness lies with you and you alone.

Ultimately, this is not a meditation about Adam or Bill, Tiger or Howard. It's a sermon about each one of us. For we have all, each one of us, been tempted and failed. We have all broken promises, violated trusts, bent the truth. We have all hurt those who love us. So let us be clear. When we do those things, there is nothing about us that inherently deserves forgiveness. We could choose to say "no", and too often we have said "yes". But we can still be forgiven, even when we don't deserve it. Grace is possible, but it's always up to those we hurt to bestow it upon us as a gift. This supper, this communion meal, is therefore both a celebration and an invitation. It is a celebration of the fact that forgiveness is the will and way of God, lived out in the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And it is an invitation to us, each one, to incarnate that grace, and to offer that forgiveness, to those around us who wait, and hope, for the healing which it offers.

Amen