

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Charles M. Cary
Sermon: "Questions People Ask III: Lead Us Not Into Temptation?"
July 23 2017
Matthew 6: 9-15

In Christ God is not some kind of divine tease – a jokester who enjoys seeing us struggle. He is instead the one who empowers us to say "No" to every temptation.

Bill Jones asks the question before us today. He wonders what's behind this petition in the Lord's Prayer asking God to "lead us not into temptation." Bill's question made me think in the run up to this sermon. What kind of God would lead us into temptation? And does he leave us on our own there to get into trouble and fall further from Grace? Or, does He empower us to say "No" to the evil one – the temptation to choose wrong over right – evil over good - selfishness over the common good? Think about it. Adam and Eve are tempted in the Garden of Eden. Abraham is tempted and tested in the near sacrifice of his and Sarah's son Isaac. Jesus is tempted in the wilderness – not once but three times. He is famished after 40 days of fasting – tempted to turn stones to bread. He is tempted to make a Faustian bargain with the devil – selling His soul in exchange for control of all the kingdoms of this life. He is tempted to throw Himself from the roof of the temple as a means of impressing the world with His supernatural powers. He says "No" to each provocation. The narrative invites me to consider whether or not I could say "NO" –or would I abandon my integrity – sell my soul to gain power/advantage for myself?

"Lead us not into temptation – but deliver us from evil". That's the way we learned the Lord's Prayer in KJV. The New Revised Standard Version says it differently. "Do not bring us to the time of trial – but rescue us from the evil one". A short answer to Bill's question is the knowledge that life itself is a series of temptations, one test after another. The petition by itself is incomplete if not combined with what follows it. As one Bible scholar pointed out to me long ago – Pay attention to the conjunctions - "lead us not into temptation – but deliver us from evil. Do not bring us to the times of trial – but rescue us from the evil one. These conjunctions keep us going from truth to truth. The questions emerge – will we choose life? Will we choose death? Will we choose the difficult right over the easy wrong? Will we choose the inconvenient path over the more convenient one because that's what the Lord requires? God is less like the genie who gets some kind of odd thrill when we visit the refrigerator late at night when no one is looking – breaking our diet. He is instead the sovereign creator who helps us avoid the temptations to sell our soul. To sellout – to give up or give in.

Jesus Christ empowers us to say "No" when everything about us wants us to say "Yes".

The turn of the 20th century promised heady times for the world in general and our country in particular. The big questions were whether the computers could handle a change in the millennium clock. We were braced to adjust to the worst should they fail. They did not. But then 9/11 happened and we realized that we were vulnerable to a new set of realities in which those who hate us would use our own airplanes to destroy us. Harry Gould – one of the most sincere – responsible elders I have ever served with asked this question at Old First in Huntington – "Chuck – why do they hate us so?". So perplexed he was that one human could despise another. 9/11 was a turning point – not just at airport security lines – but in ways we choose to live with others.

There was another crisis which altered the course of life in our nation. It happened at about the same time in Houston, Texas where a whistle-blower named Sherron Watkins saw some things on the financial reports at the Enron Corporation. There were entries on the credit side that were unrecognizable to her, an experienced accountant. She brought her questions to her superior who dismissed them as being unworthy of her concern or anyone's concern. Little things. Large numbers. Sherron Watkins continued to be troubled by what she was seeing – things which simply did not add up. She then went to Kenneth Lay – who began to see the handwriting on the wall. Soon federal auditors were at work in the halls of Enron – employees were dismissed, losing their livelihood, their hard-earned pensions- and were suddenly adrift. Sherron Watkins had the nerve to say no to falsehood, and yes to exposing the troubling truth. She said – no to "cooking the books" – and yes to financial integrity. She blew the whistle-and as a result we saw the colossal error of having your auditors become part of the team, rather than the independent people they are supposed to be.

Sherron was once asked where she got the courage to speak up...and to the credit of her Presbyterian Sunday School she referenced what she learned in her church. There she learned the Lord's Prayer! There she learned the difference between the hard right and the easier wrong. There – where a teacher who was paid nothing – instilled in her students the capacity to say no to the cheap and say yes to a life of Christian discipleship. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one.

God did not create us as some kind of robots – easily programmed to do right and avoid wrong. He created us as humans with free will who live at the intersection of good and evil. God knows we need help to choose the good when such choices present themselves!

Other whistle-blowers have done the same thing. Andrew Millar, head of Clinical Research at British Biotech in 1998 – at great cost brought to light the liabilities of a cancer drug. Harry M. Markopolos, who first called attention to the Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme. The Boston Globe investigative reporters who shined a light on the clergy sex abuse scandal and the massive cover up under Cardinal Law. We are tempted to simply go along – as if nothing else matters. We are tempted – but I hear the Lord calling us to say “no” to the temptations, the Faustian bargains, the cheap or the easy. And say yes to a life of righteousness and peace.

How about you? How about us? Where have we fallen to the temptations to accept the false? Where have we been tested and been found wanting – weak in the face of what love requires? Where has duty called us to blow the whistle but we were afraid? Where - in what group did our conscience ask us to speak up- but we remained silent because of the failure of nerve? Where have we prayed the Lord's Prayer, but ignored its implications because – there seemed to be more pressing matters? I cannot answer for you – But you can.

Here we are in a time of change at First Presbyterian. It has not been easy. Changes in pastors – regardless of the reasons – are rarely if ever, easy. They require interim pastors like me – whose learning curves are steep – They require other things – but to all of us – the church offers a great test – a temptation in light of this petition in the Lord's Prayer. We are tempted in this interim period to let up. Stop giving as much or as often. Stop worshipping regularly, stop serving with energy – imagination, intelligence, and love. When there is conflict we are all tempted to carry out a blame game. If so and so had done – or not done this we wouldn't have the problems we have. If this person had refrained from this – or that person had refrained from that – things might have gone differently and there would be smooth sailing in the summer of 2017. In so many, many ways, changes in Christ's Church test us. They test our capacity to love. They challenge our ability to recognize the image of Christ in each other. They tempt us to be less than what God calls us to be – the Body of Christ – alive – active- making a difference for good within the church and beyond. Today's question is timely because it invites us to see where and how we are saying yes to God- and no to the evil one – yes to God, and no to all that would deny Him.

I hope and I pray – that day when a new history of First Presbyterian is written and the chapter on these years is in print - it will say thusly. The people of the church rose to the challenge they faced in 2017. They moved on to a season which renewed their trust and respect for each other. They practiced forgiveness and reconciliation refusing to compromise with evil and passed the test of faithfulness. They wept with those who wept, and they rejoiced with those who rejoiced! They experienced renewal, believing that their best days were yet to be!! Let the history of First Presbyterian Church declare that in a time of testing – you the people of the church yielded not to temptation – but instead recaptured the love and zeal which made you proud to be part of this church in the first place!

Poet Jane Kenyon – composed this poem during her bout with cancer – it's a poem which describes her triumph over despair – her courage rather than her fear – her ability to meet the tests/ the temptations of her mortality:

Otherwise:

I got out of bed

On two strong legs.

It might have been otherwise.

I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe

Flawless peach. It might have

Been otherwise.

I took the dog up the hill to the birchwood.

All morning I did the work I love.

At noon I lay down with my mate

It might have been otherwise.

We ate dinner together at a table with

Silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise.

I slept in a bed in a room with

paintings on the walls, and planned

Another day just like this day.

But one day, I know it will be otherwise.

Jesus Christ is the “otherwise” to our temptations. He and His cross are the “no” to the false – and “yes” to what is true. No to what is wrong – and yes to what is right.

He is our “otherwise” in face of temptation – and the assurance that our faith is never in vain.