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The gift of temptation  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 2:15-15, 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent. Isn't that exciting?

Today, I want to discuss the great benefits in our lives of ... temptation. The lectionary gave us 2 readings around temptation today. The classic story in Genesis of Adam and Eve being tempted in the garden of eden And the story of Jesus going into the wilderness and being tempted.

But since we've just read those texts, I cannot leave them alone. Because our traditional way of understanding temptation seems a bit .... Incomplete. We often think that we are tempted to do things we know we should not do. But that does not quite fit either of our biblical stories today. But I'd better explain that. Because I'm challenging about 2000 years of tradition here.

Consider the story in Genesis. We have been taught that this is a story about being tempted to eat an apple. But for me, the story is not about the temptation to do something at all. The story is about something else entirely. The story is also much stranger than what we remember from Sunday School.

[image: Adam and Eve eating the apple]

Here's a depiction of the scene. We all know this, right? Adam and Eve were told by God to not eat apples from the tree in the middle of the garden of Eden. A snake - who is the devil - tempts Eve. Then Eve tempts Adam. And Adam and Eve eat the apple. And in consequence, God ejects the pair from the garden of Eden. Simple, right? But when we actually read the biblical story itself, will see how many details have been added through cultural embellishments. Consider these facts:

- In the biblical story, Adam and Eve are not named. They are simply "the man" and "the woman".
- In the biblical story, the fruit is not an apple. The type of fruit is not specified. Early Christian art actually depicts the fruit as a fig. When the Bible was translated by

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Europeans, the unspecified fruit became - in our collective imagination - an apple.

- In the biblical story, God does not speak to the woman and the man. God speaks only to the man.
- In the biblical story, the snake does not speak to the woman and the man. The snake speaks only to the woman.
- In the biblical story, the snake is not the devil.
- In the biblical story, God says that humans are free to eat of every tree in the garden. So the original humans only ate plant-based foods. They were vegan. Just sayin’.
- Interestingly, in the biblical story, God lies to the man but the snake tells the woman the truth.

[image: Iron Maiden Adam and Eve image]

Many societies have added extra cultural layers to the basic story. Those extra layers of meaning have changed over time. And some of those layers need to be discarded. For one thing, the story of Adam and Eve is often used by Christians to justify sexist behaviours. In the words of Pamela Milne, “The story of Eve in the book of Genesis has had a more profoundly negative impact on women throughout history than any other biblical story. ... Early Christian writers depicted Eve as subordinate and inferior to Adam ... because she was created after and from him ... and as weak, seductive and evil, the cause of Adam's disobedience. ... These concepts formed the basis for later deprecatory patriarchal Christian theologies of woman. ... The themes of inferiority, evil and seductiveness continued to be emphasized in the writings of Luther, Calvin and Knox and remain disturbingly prominent [today] in fundamentalist preaching. ... Phyllis Trible of Union Theological Seminary ... conceded that “the Bible is largely a ‘man's book,’ but she argued that the problem with the Eve story was not the text itself but the centuries of accrued sexist context that had grown up around it.”<sup>1</sup>

Trible is correct that centuries of accrued sexism is the larger problem. But the problem existed even in the first century church. For example, in the Epistle 1 Timothy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/03/26/genesis-from-eves-point-of-view/dc371184-1f4c-4142-ac2d-d5efee72a0da/>

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The author of 1 Timothy not only denigrates women, but names the Genesis story as the reason for the denigration. 1 Timothy chapter 2 starting at verse 11 says, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”<sup>2</sup>

That passage - which is completely sexist - is excused by many Christians. For example, the fundamentalist web site, “gotquestions.com” excuses the text saying, “In the church, women are not to exercise spiritual authority over men; that much is clear. The reasons for God’s directive for the church are also clear: the order of creation and the deception of Eve. Men, not women, are to be pastors; this difference in role, however, has no bearing on a woman’s intrinsic worth before God.” To me that sounds like double-talk. But even if it was true that the text from 1 Timothy has no bearing on a woman’s intrinsic worth before God, the text has certainly had a dramatic impact on women’s assigned worth in society. Even today.

I want to note in passing just how out of date this text is. And the interpretation which has infiltrated our society for 1000’s of years. The whole idea that women led man astray, using the narrative of the apple as a metaphor for women being sexually seductive. Here’s the short version. Men - who wrote the Bible - felt intimidated by their attraction to women, so they decided to blame women for being attractive, instead of realizing that perhaps men need to learn some self-control. Much easier to just blame one group rather than to grow up ourselves, right? And that lesson goes far beyond male/female relationships.

In any case, a traditional reading of the Adam and Eve story has been - and continues to be - a real barrier to equity between sexes and genders. At least within the Christian community. Fortunately, the garden of eden story was not meant to be taken literally anyway. The story - which was adapted from the much older Babylonian creation story found in the Enuma Elish, is an etiology. The story is designed to answer a simple question. The question that the garden of eden story was designed to answer is this: “If

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 2:11-15

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God is the creator and God is loving, why is our world in such a mess.”

The magazine “Men’s Health” had a comment on the Genesis story that was far more succinct. This is their take on the male perspective on the story, but with a modern lens. “While Eve receives most of the blame for getting humankind kicked out of paradise, it should be mentioned that she was duped: God never told her about no stinkin’ forbidden fruit. Adam, on the other hand, knew exactly what he was doing and knew it was wrong. Downside: Adam was kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Upside: Adam finally realized Eve was naked [and that had to be worth something].”<sup>3</sup>

[image: cat temptation]

The Genesis story has been used to justify sexism. But more than that, it has also shaped our society’s sense of what the word “temptation” means. Because we have all been taught that temptation is bad. For example, Chilean Catholic priest Segundo Galilea describes temptation as “an invitation to violate God’s will, or an invitation to sin”. In other words, temptation is an invitation to do something bad. Even non-religious people share this view. Some non-religious people define temptation as an “incompatibility between a people’s desired behaviour and their personal goals”<sup>4</sup>. Everyone - except me - seems to think that temptation is bad.

[image: Oscar wilde]

Which is why I hope that at least some of you were surprised by the title of this reflection. I hope that at least some of you are surprised to hear that temptation is also a gift. If temptation is bad, and if we are only ever tempted by bad things, why is Rev Paul talking about the gift of temptation? Here is a clue. Our story in Matthew open with the words, “Then Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” The spirit wanted Jesus to be tempted. So Rev Paul and the spirit think that temptation can be a gift. Perhaps there is more depth to temptation after all.

[image: identity]

In many ways, temptation is not really about what we do. Temptation is more

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.menshealth.com/trending-news/a19538563/19-temptations-you-should-resist-or-indulge/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-bad-looks-good/201912/hard-resist-temptation-here-is-how-regain-control>

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about our identity. Temptation is more about who we are. Consider the story of Adam and Eve again. The so-called “temptation” was to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Ever since Sunday School we have been taught that Adam and Eve made a mistake. Disobeying God and eating the fruit is even called “original sin”. It is allegedly the reason that Adam and Eve got booted out of the garden. An action known in Traditional Christianity as “The Fall”... But did Adam and Eve make a mistake? I don’t think so!

The temptation in front of them was not about eating an apple. It was about choosing to learn the knowledge of good and evil. In short summary, the temptation was really a decision - to remain childish, or to grow up.

Would you rather live your life essentially living in a daycare and not knowing good and evil. Living your life just by doing what you are told? Or would you rather have knowledge - even incomplete knowledge - of good and evil and live your own life? Surrounded of course by other people that are also struggling to figure this all out? In a messy world where most people are just doing the best that they can and where some people are intentionally generating a lot of drama and conflict?

The temptation that Adam and Eve faced was not eating an apple. The temptation they faced was whether or not they wanted to remain childish and live in a simplistic world, or whether they wanted to grow up and live in the real world. The temptation was about their identity. And they chose to grow up. And I for one am delighted that they did!

The temptation that Adam and Eve faced was not eating the apple. The temptation they faced was whether they were happy to be coddled their entire lives or whether they wanted to live into their God-given potential in the real world.

And this in many ways matches the temptations that Jesus felt. Jesus was tempted 3 times - at least in the version of the temptation story found in Matthew. What were the 3 temptations?

[image: bullet points below]

- Jesus was tempted to feed the world.
- Jesus was tempted to become a miracle worker.
- Jesus was tempted to become a power monger.

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In all 3 cases, Jesus did not take the bait. The temptation for Jesus was to NOT live out his God-given potential. Jesus's temptations were to NOT live into his mission. To instead do other - perhaps worthwhile - activities.

Jesus resisted those 3 alluring temptations. Instead of giving in, after Jesus returns from the wilderness, he calls the fishers to follow him, and then almost instantly Jesus is teaching and healing. Jesus is not a baker. Jesus is not a miracle worker. Jesus is not a power monger. Jesus is a healer. The temptation of Jesus was not about what Jesus would do. The temptation of Jesus were about who Jesus would be.

So finally - why did the spirit WANT Jesus to be tempted by the devil? Because it is only when we are actually tempted and we see how we respond to temptations that we discover who we are.

[image: apple]

I remember one course in seminary where we discussed how ministers need to behave. We covered a lot of topics of course. But in one class we discussed the issue of stealing from our own churches. All of the student - including me - declared that there is no chance that WE were going to steal from our future congregations. But the professor had done this a few times before. And he invited us to imagine more and more alluring amounts. And he invited us to imagine that perhaps we felt underpaid or unappreciated at the same time. All of us were happy to say that we would not steal from our own congregations when we thought that perhaps \$100 was on the table. But the professor invited us to consider larger amounts. Would we steal - if we knew we could get away with it - \$50k? \$100k? What about stealing from the church in order to give the money to poor people who really needed it? It is easy to resist the temptation to steal \$100. But the conversation amongst students got far more interesting when we imagined that larger sums might be available. And in the end, that conversation was not really about money at all. It was about our own understanding of ministry. The discussion about temptation helped us understand ourselves better. The discussion around temptation was not about what we would do. The discussion around temptation was around who we would be in ministry.

And that is the gift of temptation. How we respond to temptation says a lot about

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who we are. We also learn a lot about ourselves simply by paying attention to what it is that we find tempting.

One temptation I see in many churches including ours is the temptation to believe that our past defines our future. That's a very attractive temptation for many people. To me this is like the temptation to remain in the garden of Eden, safe, secure, rather than to engage with the real world all around us.

Or as we discussed last week, the temptation to believe that we cannot make a difference in another person's life. Or the temptation to believe that we cannot make a difference in our own lives.

As Lent begins, I trust that this will be a period of reflection for us all. As individuals and as a congregation. And I invite us to deeply consider our own temptations. And to learn from them. To learn about who we really are.

Enjoy the journey of Lent. We are all in this together.

Amen.