
The gift of temptation
Chapel in the Park 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.

And I hope I'm not alone here. But our traditional way of understanding temptation seems a bit incomplete. We have been trained to think that temptations are bad - so why am I calling temptation a gift? We often think that we are tempted to do bad things we know we should not do. But that description does not fit either of our biblical stories today. Get comfy. We need to chat.

Let's start with the story in Genesis. We have been taught that this is a story about being tempted to eat an apple and to disobey God. But for me, the story is not about the temptation to do anything 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]

Think of the version of the story of Adam and Eve that we carry in our heads. 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, we see how many details have been added through cultural embellishments. Consider:

- 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 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 and 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. And some of those layers need to be discarded. For one thing, the story of the man and the woman 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.”¹

This negative image of women was also found in the early church. For example, in the Epistle 1 Timothy. The author of 1 Timothy not only denigrates women, but names

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

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 she continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”²

The Adam and Eve story has been very detrimental to male/female relations for a very long time.

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 to Adam].”³

Fortunately for us, 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 question. The question that the garden of eden story was designed to answer is this: “If God is the creator and God is loving, why is our world in such a mess. And who’s fault is it.”

[image: cat temptation]

The Genesis story has been used to justify sexism for centuries. 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

² 1 Timothy 2:11-15

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

“incompatibility between a people’s desired behaviour and their personal goals”⁴.

Everyone - except me - seems to think that temptation is bad.

[image: Oscar wilde]

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 opens 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 quote]

In many ways, temptation is not really about what we do. Temptation is more about who we are. Temptation is more about our identity. Our sense of self. Let’s 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 paradise. An action known in Traditional Christianity as “The Fall”... But did Adam and Eve make a mistake?

The temptation in front of them was not about eating an apple. It was not even about disobeying God. It was about choosing to learn the knowledge of good and evil. In short summary, the temptation was really a decision. And the options were clear:

- Option 1 was to remain in the garden. Without knowing good and evil. Living your life simply obeying what you were told. Essentially, living your life like a child in a daycare world where everything is laid out for you.
- Option 2 was to embrace knowledge - perhaps incomplete knowledge - of good and evil. And to learn to live in the real world. That includes being surrounded by other human beings who are also trying to figure this all out in real-time. Living in a messy world where most people are just doing the best they can. And - sadly - some people who cannot handle that freedom spend their lives creating conflict

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

and drama.

The temptation that Adam and Eve faced was not eating an apple. The temptation was not even about disobeying God. 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 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.

The temptation was about their identity. And they chose to grow up. And I will now challenge 2000 years of tradition and state that the man and the woman did not make a mistake. They just choose to grow up. And thank God for that!

This idea is not all that strange. It might even match your own experience of raising children. If you had children of your own, I hope you can relate to this. And if you do not have children of your own, perhaps you remember being a child.

We raise young children in a world with child-locks on the kitchen cabinets and rules like, "Do not cross the street unless you are holding my hand". We remove many choices from children in order for their world to be safe. And that's appropriate. But as children grow up we remove the child-locks and release them from those simplistic rules and instead help teach them how to navigate the real world - themselves. We teach them about good and evil. We prepare them to live in the real world.

Choosing the learn about good and evil was not about disobeying God, as a child might disobey a parent. Learning about good and evil was simply the desire to grow up into adults. And again - I am so grateful that the man and the woman made the right choice.

Let's also consider the temptations of Jesus. Because those temptations also do not fit the mold either. 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 political leader.

Do you notice anything in common between those 3 temptations? One thing is that all 3 of those temptations have in common is that they are actually really good things. If Jesus had chosen to feed the world, that would be a great thing. Same for being a miracle worker or a political leader. The temptations offered to Jesus were all good things.

Jesus resisted those temptations - not because they would have been bad - but because Jesus had a different mission. Jesus had a different identity. Jesus was not a baker. Jesus was not principally a miracle worker. Jesus was not a political leader. Jesus was a teacher and a healer.

In fact, in Matthew, after Jesus returns from the wilderness he first calls the fishers to follow him. And then - almost immediately after that - Jesus is teaching and healing. Living into his true identity. The temptations of Jesus were not about what Jesus might do. The temptations were about who Jesus would be. It was about identity.

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 know who we really are.

[image: apple]

I remember one course in seminary where we discussed how ministers should 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 students - 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. He also invited us to imagine that perhaps we felt underpaid or unappreciated. 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 among 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. It was about identity.

We can learn about our own identity too by paying attention to our own temptations. There are at least 3 things we can learn. We learn about ourselves when we give in to temptation. We learn about ourselves when we resist temptation. And we learn about ourselves by simply paying attention to what it is that we are most tempted by.

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.

Questions for Lenten discussion groups:

- What have you learned about yourself from temptations?
- What do you think of the idea that temptations can be a gift?
- Did Adam and Eve make a mistake?

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 more about who we really are.

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