Sunday, March 5, 1995
CHOICE AND TEMPTATION
Luke 4:1-13

All of us face choices in life. Some of them are rather easy and don't have much consequence, like deciding whether to have Wheaties or cornflakes for breakfast, or whether to wear a blue sport coat or a tan one. Temptation is not a major factor in such choices.

However, all of us also face tough choices in life — choices we would often like to avoid. For example, should I tell my grandmother that she has cancer, or should I withhold that information since she's feeling good and has no obvious symptoms? Why give her more to worry about now?

Sometimes, the difficulty of a choice causes us to brood endlessly over possible outcomes or agonize about which path to pursue. Other times, we might push ourselves through to a conclusion by sheer impatience and assertive self-will, as if resolving the issue quickly is more important than getting it right.

If you think of yourself as a good person with a deep core of ethical values that gives you the courage to stand up to tough choices, it doesn't mean you'll have fewer difficult choices than others. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Those who want to be true to their ethical principles are more likely to agonize over choices that others, drifting over the surface of life, might never even see as problems or temptations.

Consider the story of a librarian who, several years ago, was working the reference desk at a public library. The phone rang, and the caller wanted information on state laws concerning rape. The librarian asked several questions to clarify the nature of the inquiry, then explained that she would call him back after researching the question. She took down his first name and phone number and hung up.

Just as she was about to start her research, a man who had been sitting nearby approached her, flashed a detective's badge, and asked for the caller's name and phone number. The detective suspected the caller might have been involved in a rape that had occurred the previous night.

What should she do? On one hand, as a member of the community, she felt strongly about the need to maintain law and order. As a woman, she was especially concerned about a rapist possibly being at large. What if she refused to share the information and another rape occurred the following night?

On the other hand, her professional code as a librarian required her to protect the confidentiality of all callers. She believed that free access to information was vital to democracy and that if people seeking information were monitored, the police state was not far behind. The right to privacy, she felt, must extend to everyone. What if the caller was simply a student writing a paper on rape for a civics class?

The choice she faced was clearly a right-versus-right dilemma. It was right to support the community's quest for law and order, but it was also right to honor confidentiality as her professional code required. What made the choice so tough? The fact that her values were so well-defined. Had she been less concerned about confidentiality, she might have handed over

the name to the detective without hesitation. On the other hand, if she had been solely committed to her profession as a gatekeeper of society's information, she might never have considered her obligations to the larger community.

Tough choices don't always involve professional codes or criminal laws. Nor do they always involve big, headline-size issues. They often operate in areas that laws and regulations don't reach.

Here's another example: A corporate executive had recently been promoted to manager of one of his company's plants in California. He learned that every year, the producer of a well-known television adventure series filmed a segment in the plant's parking lot. Every year, upper management allowed the crew to film free of charge, typically on a Saturday when the lot was empty. And every year, the previous plant manager had given up weekend time with his family to assist the television crew.

So, the new plant manager did the same. The taping went as planned. At the end of the day, the producer thanked him and asked how the check for five hundred dollars should be made out. Surprised, the manager replied that it should be made out to the company. Equally surprised, the producer said, "Oh, okay, but in the past, we've always made it out to Mr. Gray. Shouldn't we just make it out to you?"

Was this a tough choice? In a sense, yes. The corporation, which incurred no expenses and sustained no losses from the video taping, neither asked for nor expected any payment. The plant manager, on the other hand, had given up a Saturday with no additional compensation. Yet, the asset that made the video taping possible belonged not to him but to the company. Whose money was this? Was it a payment to the corporation or a contribution for his personal services?

Furthermore, if he turned the check over to the company, would that lead to questions about what happened to last year's money and cause trouble for his predecessor, who may have reasoned differently? All in all, he felt there was some right on both sides — right for him to be compensated and right for the company to receive whatever payments were made.

Tough choices are frequently those that pit one "right" value against another. This is true in every aspect of life.

Jesus faced similar tough choices at the start of His ministry. He wrestled with understanding God's will for His ministry and was presented with three very attractive possibilities. All three had immense potential for good.

The first was to "turn these stones into bread." In a world of many hungry people, why not feed them? People were starving around Him. How could He preach good news to the poor if they were hungry? It's hard to say, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall never hunger," if their stomachs are empty. It's an alluring temptation — satisfy physical needs first, and then people will follow. But deep down, Jesus knew that satisfying physical hunger alone is never enough. "We do not live by bread alone."

The second temptation was political. Should He become a world-wide political leader to achieve good for the people of this world? In a world of slavery, war, hunger, oppression, and disregard for human rights, why not?

The third temptation was religious. Jump off the temple from its highest point and prove that He was truly God's Messiah by showing that God would protect Him. What a crowd-pleaser! But does it produce committed, loyal followers?

This third temptation was also attractive because if God didn't protect Jesus in His jump, He could always blame God for the failure. It would be God's fault, not His. This is a constant temptation for all of us — blaming God, the devil, or someone else for our problems.

But back to Jesus and His temptations and what we can learn from them. All three temptations illustrate tough choices because they pit one good against another.

Notice also that being committed to following God's way doesn't exempt you from facing temptations. The Bible says Jesus "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." This doesn't mean Jesus was tempted because He had departed from God's will. Rather, He was tempted in the process of trying to determine what God's will was for His life and ministry.

Temptation indicates strength, not weakness. We are usually tempted to do what is within our capacity. The greater the capacities, the greater the temptations. The fierceness of Jesus' struggle in the desert testifies to His power. The tempter doesn't waste time on weaklings. It is the very good who are tempted, not the borderline good.

As I said at the beginning, if you think of yourself as a good person with a deep core of ethical values, it doesn't mean you'll have fewer difficult choices than others. In fact, it's the opposite. Those who want to be true to their ethical principles are more likely to agonize over choices that others don't even see as problems or temptations.

The most difficult temptations we face don't usually involve a clear choice between good and evil. For example, most of us are never tempted to commit armed robbery. But there's plenty of skimming of small and large sums of money that goes on in a way that is well disguised.

Those doing the skimming probably believe they are doing nothing wrong. The most alluring temptations, and therefore the most dangerous, are those where we convince ourselves that the endeavors are reasonable and promise good results before we put our minds and hands to them.

Before I conclude, let me make a few comments about the role of the devil in this Bible story. The story opens with, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil." It closes with, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Him until an opportune time."

First, the devil is often pictured as a person because evil is experienced as an intensely personal power, just as God is experienced as a personal power.

Second, it's helpful to think of the devil as having a separate existence, not because evil exists outside of us but because evil is both in us and something greater than us.

Third, the devil is often described as a fallen angel because the worst evil doesn't come from our lower nature but from our spiritual nature — always seeking to corrupt the highest within us.

Fourth, the devil is exceedingly subtle, rarely suggesting that we do something bad, but invariably suggesting something reasonable, something disguised as good.

Above all, remember the last sentence in the story: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Him until an opportune time.”

We can learn a great deal about choice and temptation from this story of Jesus and His temptations. Jesus rejected the way of flaunting miracles and refused to take up the political sword. The way of God’s response to human need is different. But the choices and temptations Jesus faced, and which you and I face, don’t remain forever in the wilderness. The tempter will watch and wait for the “opportune time.” Amen.