Book 30

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 no matter what we decide doesn't have much consequence. Should I have wheaties for breakfast or cornflakes? Should I wear my blue sport coat or my tan one? Temptation is not a major factor in such choices.

All of us also face some tough choices in life. Some of these we would like to avoid. Should I tell my grandmother that she has cancer, or because she is feeling so good and has no obvious symptoms, maybe it's best not to tell her at least for the time being. 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 paths to pursue. There are other times when we push ourselves through to a conclusion by sheer impatience and assertive self-will as though getting it resolved were 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 the tough choices, that doesn't mean you will have fewer difficult choices than others but quite the opposite. Those who want to be true to their ethical principles are apt to agonize over choices that other people, drifting over the surface of life, might never even see as

problems or temptations.

There was a librarian who, several years ago, was working the reference desk at the public library in her community. The phone rang. The person on the phone wanted some information on state laws concerning rape. The librarian asked several questions to clarify the nature of his inquiry. Then, in keeping with long established library policy designed to keep the phone lines from being tied up, she explained that she would call him back in a few minutes after researching his question. She took down his first name and phone number and hung up.

She was just getting up to do the research when a man who had been sitting in the reading area within earshot of the reference desk approached

her. Flashing a detective's badge, he asked for the name and phone number of the caller. The reason: the conversation he had overheard led him to suspect that the caller was a perpetrator of a rape that had happened the night before in the community.

What should she do? On the one hand, she herself was a member of the community. She felt very strongly about the need to maintain law and order. As a woman, she was especially concerned that a rapist might be at large in the community. And as a citizen, she wanted to do whatever she could to reduce the possibility that he might strike again. After all, what if she refused to tell--and another rape took place the following night?

On the other hand, she felt just as strongly that her professional code as a librarian required her to protect the confidentiality of all callers. She felt that free access to information was vital to the success of democracy, and that if people seeking information were being watched and categorized simply by the kinds of questions they asked, the police state was not far behind. The right of privacy, she felt must extend to everyone. After all, what if this caller was simply a student writing a paper on rape for a civics class?

The choice she faced was clearly of the right-versus-right sort. 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 for her? The fact that her values were so well de-

fined. Had she been less concerned about the confidentiality of information--which in its highest form, grows out of a desire to respect and honor everyone in her community--she might not have hesitated to turn over the name to the detective. She might have bowed to the authority of the officer. On the other hand, has she single-mindedly committed to her profession as a gatekeeper of society's information, she might never even have considered her obligations to the larger community. She might simply have stood on the principle of confidentality, and seen no conflict with the urgency of a social need.

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. There was a corporate executive who had recently been promoted to manager of one of his company's plants in California. Every year, he learned, the producer of one of Hollywood's best-known television adventure series video-taped a segment for one of its shows in the plant's parking lot. Every year the upper management at his firm's corporate headquarters allowed the crew to do the filming free of charge--typically on a Saturday, when the lot was empty. And every year, Mr. Gray, the former plant manager had given up weekend time with his family in order to be on location and assist the television crew.

So this year the new plant manager did the

same. The taping went as planned. At the end of the day, the producer thanked him for his help, 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. Surprised in turn, 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?"

Tough choice? In a sense, yes. The corporation, which incurred no expenses and sustained no losses because of 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 this 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 out the issue in a different way and thought it was all right to accept the money. All in all he felt that there was some right on both sides--that it was right for him to be compensated, and yet right for the company to receive whatever payments were made.

Both of these examples I've used here come from a new book by Rushworth Kidder, HOW GOOD PEOPLE MAKE TOUGH CHOICES.

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

Jesus faced the same kind of tough choices as he was about to begin his ministry. He was wrestling with what the will of God was for him in his ministry and he was presented with three very attractive possibilities. All three had immense possibilities for the good.

The first, "turn these stones into bread." In a world of many hungry people, why not feed them? All around him people were starving. How could he preach good news to the poor if they were hungry? Wouldn't it be difficult to say to a bunch of starving people, "I am the bread of life, those who come to me shall never hunger,"

and then not feed them food for their stomachs as well as food for their spirits?It's an alluring temptation. Satisfy people's physical needs first and then they will follow you. Yet deep down Jesus knew that food to satisfy physical hunger is never enough. We do not live by bread alone. Perhaps at this point, Jesus remembered the Old Testament story about his ancestors. It was only after the Israelites were filled with manna that they rebelled against God. Only after their stomachs were full did they doubt their high calling.

It was an attractive temptation for another reason. Was he truly the Son of God? Note that the tempter prefaced this first temptation with that teasing question, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

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

The third temptation was religious. Jump off the temple from its highest point. Prove to people that he was truly God's Messiah, by showing that God would protect him. Perform an amazing act so that people would follow him easily. What a crowd pleaser! Who could doubt that he was God's chosen one if after jumping off the pinnacle of the temple and right before he hit the ground a cluster of angels would come out of nowhere to catch Jesus just before he hit the ground. People love drama and sensation. But

does it produce committed loyal followers?

This third temptation was also very 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. We want to either blame God or the devil or someone else for our bad choices or our moral failures and thereby avoid personal responsibility.

That's the biggest temptation of all for most of us--the temptation to blame someone else or society as a whole for our problems.

But now back to Jesus and his temptations and what we can learn from them. All three temptations illustrate tough choices because they seem

to pit one good against another good.

Notice also that being committed to following the way of God in your daily life does not exempt you from facing temptations. The Bible story says that Jesus "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." The story is not saying that Jesus was tempted because he had departed from following God's will. Rather he was tempted in the process of trying to determine what God's will was for his life and ministry.

Notice too that temptation indicates strength, not weakness. We are usually tempted to do that which is in our capacity. And the greater the capacities, the greater are the temptations. The fierceness of the desert struggle is a testimony to Jesus' power. The tempter does not want to

waste time on weaklings. It is the very very good who are tempted, not the borderline good.

As I said in the beginning of this sermon, if you think of yourself as a good person with a deep core of ethical values that doesn't mean you will have fewer difficult choices than others but quite the opposite. Those who want to be true to their ethical principles are apt to agonize over choices that other people don't even consider problems or temptations.

And as we noted earlier, the most difficult temptations we face do not usually involve a situation where there is 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 that is not at all obvious and is well disguised.

In addition, those doing the skimming probably have convinced themselves that they are doing nothing wrong and in fact may have convinced themselves they are doing good.

The most alluring temptations and therefore the most dangerous are those when we convince ourselves that the endeavors are reasonable and promise good results before we put our minds and hands to them.

Before I conclude this sermon on choice and temptation, I need to make a few comments about the role of the devil in this Bible story. The story opens in Luke with the statement: "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." And the story closes with this statement: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."

Here are four brief comments about the devil that might help.

First of all, the devil is usually pictured as a person because evil is experienced as an intensely person power in the same way 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 is also something greater than us.

Third, the devil is often described as a fallen angel because the worst evil does not come out of our so-called lower nature, but in our spiritual nature--always seeking to corrupt the highest that is in us.

Fourth, as we have seen throughout this sermon, the devil is exceedingly subtle, rarely suggesting that we do something bad, but invariably suggesting that we do something quite reasonsable, that which is disguised as good.

And remember above all the last sentence in the story. "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until and opportune time."

We can learn a great deal about choice and temptation in our own life from this little story of

Jesus and his temptations.

Jesus rejected the way of flaunting miracles and he refused to take up the political sword. The way of God's response to human need is otherwise. But the choices and temptations he faced and which you and I face are not left forever in the wilderness. The tempter will watch and wait for the "opportune time." Amen.