Sunday, March 1, 1998
DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CHOICES
Luke 4:1-13

The real difficult choices in life are not between what we know to be good or evil, but those choices that seem to pit one good against another. That's what Jesus faced as he was about to begin his ministry. He was wrestling with what the will of God was for him, and he was presented with three very attractive possibilities. All three had immense potential for 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 crowd 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. But on the other hand, they will probably follow you for the wrong reasons, and once you quit providing for their physical needs, they will desert you.

Deep down, Jesus knew that food to satisfy physical hunger is never enough. We do not live by bread alone. It can also create an unhealthy dependency. We've all heard the old saying, "Give a hungry person a fish and he will have food for a day. Teach a hungry person to fish, and he will have food for a lifetime."

Since he knew the Old Testament stories of his people, Jesus remembered that when the Israelites were in the wilderness after leaving slavery in Egypt, it was shortly after they were filled with manna that they rebelled against God.

"Turn these stones into bread" was an attractive option and a tough choice for another reason: Was he truly the chosen one 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." Jesus probably thought, at least for a moment, "Maybe I should test my powers to see if I am really God's chosen one."

This first tough choice that Jesus faced was personal and social. The second was political.

Should he become a worldwide 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 rights, why not?

Lest you misunderstand, this is not to say that going into politics is always a bad choice. For many, it can be the right choice. The temptation is to believe that there is a political solution to every problem. We face that temptation today. Got a social problem? Pass a law. Got an economic problem? Pass a law or elect a leader who promises to solve all those problems because the solutions are so simple. Is crime a problem? Increase capital punishment. Are drugs a problem? Put people in prison for longer terms. We love simple solutions, even when studies show they don't work.

The third temptation was religious. Jump off the temple from its highest point. Prove to people that you are truly God's Messiah by showing that God will protect you. The choice was to

perform an amazing act so that people would follow him gladly. What a crowd pleaser! Who could doubt that he was God's chosen one 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 him just before he hit the ground. People love drama, sensation, and magic. But do these dramatic events produce committed, loyal followers?

This third choice was also very attractive because if God didn't protect him in his jump, if he lived, he could always blame God for the failure. It would be God's fault, not his. As I mentioned in a previous sermon, this is a constant temptation for all of us. We want to blame God or the devil or someone else for our bad choices or moral failures and thereby avoid personal responsibility.

All three of his tough choices were especially difficult because they seemed to pit one good against another.

That's true for us today. Consider these examples. It seems right to protect the endangered spotted owl in the old-growth forests of the American Northwest and right to provide jobs for loggers.

It is right to provide our children with the finest public schools available and right to prevent the constant upward spiral of state and local taxes.

It is right to refrain from meddling in the internal affairs of sovereign nations and right to help protect the undefended people in regions of the world where they are being slaughtered.

What, then, are some of the things we can learn from these difficult choices which Jesus faced as we deal with the tough decisions in our own lives?

First, this story of facing difficult choices tells us that being committed to following the way of God in your daily life does not exempt you from facing tough decisions and alluring temptations. The Bible story says that Jesus "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." The story is not saying that he was tempted because he had departed from following God's will. Rather, his hard choices came in the process of trying to determine what God's will was for his life and ministry.

The more you are concerned with discovering God's will for your life, the more tough choices you will have to face.

Second, we learn from this story that facing difficult choices is a sign of strength, not weakness. We are usually tempted to do that which is within our capacity. And the greater the capacities, the greater the temptations.

Here's an individual who has tremendous natural talent for leadership and a gift for public speaking; she will face some tough choices in how these gifts are to be used.

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 good who are tempted the most, who face the toughest choices, not the borderline good.

I repeat, what this story tells us is that the most difficult choices 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 are many situations that involve small and large sums of money where choices have to be made, and the ethical issues are not completely clear. Those who make the deals probably have convinced themselves that they are doing nothing wrong and, in fact, may have convinced themselves they are doing good.

Third, if you think of yourself as a good person (and I hope you do) 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 to make than others. Quite the opposite. Those who want to be true to their ethical principles are apt to agonize over choices that others, drifting over the surface of life, might never even see as problems or temptations.

You have always been taught that you should never tell a lie. Your grandmother has cancer. You know it, but she does not. She has seen a doctor, had the necessary tests, and wants to know the diagnosis. At the same time, because she is feeling so good and has no obvious symptoms, you wonder whether or not to tell her what the problem is, at least for the time being. Why give her more to worry about now?

There was a librarian several years ago 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 the 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 could be the 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, categorized, and reported simply because of the kinds of questions they asked, the police state was not far away. 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-defined. 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, had she single-mindedly committed herself 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 confidentiality and seen no conflict with the urgency of social need.

Tough choices do not always involve professional codes or criminal laws. Nor do they always involve big headline-size issues. They often appear in areas that laws and regulations don't reach. That makes the choices more difficult because there are no definite rules to guide you. Which is more important: truth or loyalty? Which rights are most important: individual rights or community rights? Is justice to be preferred over mercy or mercy over justice?

As I continue to study the life and teachings of Jesus in the New Testament, in addition to the moral principles found in the traditions of the Old Testament, there are three universal principles that guided Jesus in dealing with difficult choices. All three are interrelated and must be considered together — that is, one is not more important than the others.

One of these principles is to consider as much as possible the greatest good for the greatest number. In business terms, it demands of us a kind of cost-benefit analysis, determining who will be hurt and who will be helped, and measuring the intensity of that help.

The difficulty in applying this principle is that no one can accurately predict the outcome of a particular action. There are always unintended consequences.

Therefore, another important principle needs always to be considered alongside what we might consider to be the greatest good for the greatest number. Sometimes this second principle is called "rule-based" thinking. Jesus used it very successfully in dealing with his tough choices. When he was tempted to turn the stones into bread to feed the hungry, he recalled that his religious tradition said, "Human beings do not live by bread alone." And when the tempter told him that he could be a world ruler with extraordinary power, Jesus recognized the temptation to worship political power and worldly glory, and he recalled the commandment, "You shall worship only God and God alone."

So when we face tough choices, we always need to ask, "What universal rules apply in this situation?"

The third principle that comes from the life and teachings of Jesus is widely known as the "Golden Rule," "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It is sometimes called the "care-based" principle, since unlike the other two, it asks us to care enough about the others involved to put ourselves in their shoes.

All three of these principles are to be considered together when we are dealing with tough choices. When we do this, we will be following the way of Jesus. Amen.