Sunday, February 21, 1999
KNOWING WHEN TO SAY NO
Matthew 4:1-11

The worst kind of evil is not the absence of the good, but the perversion of the good. That is why our virtues can be so dangerous, both collectively and for us as individuals. The difficult choices come when we have to choose one virtue over another. This was the big discovery of Jesus as he wrestled with temptation.

Any virtue, when singled out and elevated by itself apart from other virtues, can become evil. It is the worst kind of evil because it is disguised as good.

Some examples. There are those who claim to love God so much that they bomb abortion clinics or kill some infidel. Every time the church has burned heretics at the stake, the people doing it were absolutely convinced they were doing God's work.

Whenever we are tempted to elevate one virtue so that it squeezes out our allegiance to the common good, we fall victim to idolatry. Apart from community, righteousness can easily turn into self-righteousness; without responsibility, freedom can turn into anarchy. If we're not careful, such virtues as patriotism, loyalty, and faith can be the sponsors of fanaticism. Even love, if not grounded in mutual esteem, soon leads to possession: possessing our "loved" as an object or being possessed by our passion.

The paradox is that every virtue, when overly magnified in isolation from other virtues, is potentially deadly. St. John Chrysostom said, "Where virtue is, there are many snares."

A snare is something we don't see until we get trapped in it. But in the case of virtues, the snares are more subtle. Even after we get trapped, we don't often recognize them. Instead, like the Pharisee in one of the parables of Jesus, we offer up a prayer to God, giving thanks that we are pure, "not like other people."

All this is what is underneath the three alluring temptations which Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry.

When he was baptized by John, Jesus knew that he had been called by God for a special purpose in life. But how would he accomplish what God wanted him to do? How should he use God's power that he had so intensely experienced? How should he use the gifts that God had given him?

These are questions all of us face in one way or another on our life's journey. All of these questions pose choices we need to make. Any good gift from God, which is a virtue, can also become a vice.

Is there anyone here today, or who is listening on the radio or watching on television, who has not asked: which road among many should you choose for your life's journey? What's the best way to use the gifts God has given you? To be sure, your potential choices and the resulting temptations which grow out of them might not seem to be of the same magnitude as those that faced Jesus, but choices still need to be made. You have to know when to say no and when to say yes.

Remember the temptation facing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as described in the book of Genesis. The serpent promises them that if they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they will be like God. What higher goal could one have? To be like God! However, hidden beneath this temptation is the desire to be like someone else.

Don't we face that temptation all the time? We want to be someone else or like someone else rather than be the best that God has made us.

Also remember this: the more talent and ability you have, the greater the temptation. The seriousness of the struggle which Jesus had in the wilderness is a testimony to his power and commitment. It is the very, very good, the virtuous, who are most tempted, not the borderline good.

In his temptations, Jesus had before him three intriguing offers — all good. The first: turn these stones into bread. Remember, Jesus was very hungry. He had not eaten for days. But it was not only to satisfy his own physical hunger that made the temptation so powerful. In a world of tremendous hunger, why not feed people? All around him, people were starving. How could he preach good news to the poor if they were hungry? It's hard to say to a group of starving people, "I am the bread of life. Those who come to me shall never hunger."

It's a seductive temptation. Isn't it a virtue to feed the hungry? Satisfy people's physical hunger first. Yet deep down, Jesus knew that food to satisfy physical hunger is never enough. We do not live by bread alone. The temptation here is not only to satisfy physical hunger but to satisfy all physical needs and desires. Take care of all your personal needs first, and the rest will be dealt with, but we never get to the spiritual.

This temptation had another part to it. Like us, Jesus sometimes had his doubts. Was he truly the Son of God? Notice the tempter prefaced both the first and the second temptation with the teasing question, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

The deeper temptation underlying all three was the question of his identity, his calling. Remember, not many days earlier, he had been baptized and had heard a voice assuring him that he was indeed God's chosen one.

The second temptation was also powerful because it was prefaced by the question, "If you are the Son of God." "If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down from a high place and see if God will save you."

It's a powerful temptation. Will God always be there for me? Why not find out? Jump off the top of the temple and see if God will rescue you. Can I truly let go and let God? Get in your car and drive recklessly and see if God will protect you. Don't take care of your physical health and see if God will keep you healthy anyway or heal you when you get sick. Then if something happens, you can always blame God. It will be God's fault, not yours.

One of our greatest temptations is to blame God or the devil or someone else for whatever happens to us and avoid any personal responsibility for our choices. Jesus, however, refused to turn over responsibility for his actions to anyone else. He refused to jump off the top of the temple. He knew when to say "no." In so doing, he was saying "yes" to personal responsibility and "yes" to trusting God.

Like the first temptation, the second one also had its social implications. It too had the possibility of being virtuous. Suppose Jesus had made the jump and didn't get hurt. Certainly, the crowds would've been impressed with a cluster of angels coming out of nowhere and catching him just before he hit the ground.

Wouldn't that have been a great sign to demonstrate he was God's chosen one? People love drama and miracles. But Jesus knew those things do not produce committed followers. He overcame this temptation by calling on his faith and his knowledge of God as revealed in his Hebrew tradition. He remembered the word of God, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." A good paraphrase of this statement is—"You shall not try to force the power of God to work in the way you think God ought to work. Do not attempt to manipulate God for your own ends."

The third temptation has the tempter taking Jesus to a high place and showing him all the kingdoms of the world. "All these I will give to you," said the tempter, "if you will fall down and worship me." Take over the kingdoms and save the world that way. Take over the government of the world. Force people to do good. Do away with crime, oppression, and disregard for life by using dictatorial powers. Take away people's freedom and force them to obey the law.

Again Jesus said "no" to this temptation. He knew that the kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof were not in the tempter's power to give to anyone. God has not turned over the world to anyone to give to someone else. Furthermore, he knew that forcing people to act one way or another is not God's way.

All three of these temptations have several things in common. One of them is the temptation to take a short-cut to accomplish what seemed to be God's purpose. Short-cuts are not always bad, but before you take one, you need to ask, "Am I doing this for me, or is it for God or a larger purpose, and is it the best way to follow God's will?" Will the short-cut do more damage in the long run?

Jesus' temptations did not end once he left the wilderness and began his ministry. Again and again, he was tested. Determining and following God's will is never easy for any one of us. That's because God never lays out the complete journey of your life for you to see ahead of time.

There are many forks in the road, and it's not always a simple question of right versus wrong, but the tough choices are those which pit one "right" or virtue against another.

In addition, if you think of yourself as a good person with a deep core of ethical principles, 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 consider as problems or temptations.

The second thing the three temptations have in common, as do all temptations, is that Jesus was able to successfully deal with them because he had learned when to say "no." Saying "no" to something that sounds like a good idea is not easy.

It's a fascinating study to look at the life of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament and discover those times when he said "no," the instances when he refused to do something when asked. He knew when to say "no" and when to say "yes."

Knowing when to say “no” can be a difficult decision. If you are a parent, you’ve probably discovered that knowing when to say “no” is not always easy. As I look back on my conduct as a parent when our children were growing up, there were times when I said “no” to insignificant requests with little justification when I should have said “yes.”

It’s almost as if, as parents, we’re given a certain quota of “no’s,” and if we use them up for the unimportant decisions, we have none left for the significant requests.

What our Christian faith teaches is that every time, as an individual, you say “no” to a temptation, or appetite, or desire, or something that on the surface looks good, you are actually saying “yes” to a higher value.

For example, when you say “no” to the recreational use of drugs or any kind of mind-altering substance, you are saying “yes” to healthy living. When you say “no” to a grudge you’ve been holding onto, you are saying “yes” to forgiveness and “yes” to trying to re-establish a relationship that has been broken.

In facing and overcoming the temptations, Jesus had to be ethically fit. Ethical fitness is something like physical fitness. You’re not born into physical fitness. You reach it by giving a little effort each day. Once you reach physical fitness, you’ve got to maintain it.

Ethical fitness is much the same. You may come from the most moral, high-minded, right-thinking family in the world, and that’s a help. You may have gone to a church regularly and been raised in a community of honest and hard-working people, and that makes it so much easier to resist temptations, and it forms the foundation for ethical fitness. However, you still have to keep in shape by asking the right questions, especially when you face moral dilemmas.

Here are two questions to ask yourself which will help maintain your ethical fitness so that you know when to say “no” and when to say “yes":

When you face a difficult choice, an ethical dilemma, ask yourself, “Am I taking this road mostly because it is a short-cut, and if so, am I doing this for my benefit or for God’s benefit and the benefit of the community at large?”

Am I using the gifts God has given me so that God’s will is served, or am I using my gifts primarily to promote my own interest, my selfish desires, and my status?

A friend of mine, who is a very successful person, said to me one day, “I think I’ve got it just about figured out what God is going to ask each one of us at the end of this life’s journey — there will be two questions. First, God will ask, ‘What have you done with all I’ve given you?’ That’s the easy one. The second is tougher, ‘For whom did you do it?'” Amen.