Sunday, February 17, 2002
HOW GOOD PEOPLE MAKE TOUGH CHOICES
Matthew 4:1-11

How Good People Make Tough Choices is the title of a book by Rushworth Kidder, published in 1995. One of the assumptions upon which the book is based is that frequently the most 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 good. Or to state it another way, there is always the temptation in our tough decisions to confuse means and ends. You've heard people ask, "Does the end ever justify the means?"

Jesus faced some tough choices as he was about to begin his ministry. These were choices that seemed to pit one good against another good. Not only was he wrestling with what the will of God was for him and how he might accomplish it; he was also struggling with his self-identity. "Who am I?" The tempter began each temptation with the question, "If you are the Son of God..."

Who is this person called Jesus? Thus far that question has received an answer from a chorus of angels when he was born, an answer from John the Baptist, and even from the voice of God when Jesus was baptized, declaring, "This is my Son, the Beloved," but up to this point in his life, Jesus hasn't done very much yet. Who is he? What's he made of? So it would be natural for him to wonder, "Who am I?"

This reminds me of a story Browne Barr, one of my preaching professors in seminary, liked to tell. A four-year-old boy goes into the bedroom of his newborn sister, who is sleeping in her crib. As the parents peer curiously through the crack in the door, they watch their son lean over the bassinet and whisper, "Tell me quick, who am I? I am beginning to forget."

These wilderness experiences are designed to answer such questions. Like Moses and Elijah, Jesus spends many days in the wilderness trying to find the answers. The story says he was there for forty days. "Forty days" is a Bible metaphor meaning "a long time." The term "wilderness" is another fascinating metaphor. The people of Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness after coming out of Egyptian servitude. "The wilderness" is a term that indicates a place of testing, a time of struggle, a place where people have to depend on God and God alone. In a metaphorical sense, each one of you has spent time in the wilderness, and so have I.

Jesus was trying to discern what the will of God was for him, and he was presented with three very attractive possibilities, three tempting offers. All three had immense potential for good. These were temptations that did not promise some small personal pleasure but ways to improve the world. Sometimes when you think of something as a "temptation," you are thinking of a kind of flirtatious reality that sends seductive impulses through your body. People speak of "sweet temptations" that promise wonderful delight if only they could get over their puritanical limitations. In the words of Mae West, "Too much of a good thing can be wonderful." You have met these kinds of temptations.

When you think of someone who resists temptation, you may have in mind the person who is cold, serious, and boringly obedient to rigid rules. It is the person who never swears, smokes, or drives over the speed limit. In contrast, you think of someone who gives in to temptation as

one who avails themselves of the sheer joy of living without always worrying about the rules. Instead of eating only one piece of chocolate, this person eats two or even three.

The temptations presented here were on a grander scale. The first was, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Not only was Jesus hungry after a long fast, but there were also so many hungry people — why not feed them? Furthermore, how could he preach good news to the poor if they were hungry? Wouldn’t it be difficult to say to a group of hungry people, “I am the bread of life, those who come to me shall never be hungry,” and then not feed them food for their stomachs as well as nourishment for their spirits?

It’s an alluring temptation. Satisfy people’s physical needs first, and then they will follow you. Should he become a one-man welfare department to gain a following? But on the other hand, the people you attract will probably be following you for that reason only, and once you quit providing for their physical needs, they may stop following 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. You’ve heard the saying, “Give a hungry person a fish and they will have food for a day. Teach a hungry person how to fish and they will have food for a lifetime.”

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

The temptation to “command these stones to become loaves of bread” was an attractive option and a tough choice for another reason. Was he truly the chosen one of God? Perhaps he thought, “Maybe I should test my powers to see if I truly am God’s chosen one?”

The first tough choice Jesus faced was personal and social. The second temptation was religious. The tempter took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and let God save you.”

Prove to the people watching that you are truly God’s chosen one. This would be salvation through the spectacular. In that day, the temple was truly one of the wonders of the ancient world. Its complex took up about 15% of the entire city of Jerusalem. It was the center of the nation’s life. From the pinnacle of the temple, one would command everyone’s attention. Think of halftime at the Super Bowl.

Prove to people that you are God’s chosen one by showing everyone that God will protect you. 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? People love drama, sensation, and the spectacular. He would be a celebrity! But do these events produce committed, loyal followers? Do they have any lasting impact on the world for the good?

This second choice was also 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. This is a constant temptation for human beings. You want to blame God or the devil or someone else for your bad choices or moral failures and thereby avoid personal responsibility.

The third temptation offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. All he has to do is pledge allegiance to the one to whom power is an end in itself. One way to gain power is to worship it. Should he attempt to become a powerful political leader in order to achieve good for the people of his world? In a world of oppression, corruption, 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. We need people who are dedicated to governing in such a way that justice prevails. In the Bible, good civil leadership is affirmed.

The temptation comes when you begin to believe that there is a political solution to every problem. All you need is enough power. Is crime a problem? Build more prisons. Put more criminals to death. Is there a social problem? Pass another law. Is there an economic problem? Pass another law or elect a leader who promises to solve all those problems, especially a candidate who tells you that all our problems have simple solutions.

Or at the opposite extreme, elect a candidate who tells you that all our problems are the result of too much regulation. If you elect him, he will relax the rules. Trust people's good intentions. We don't need regulators or referees. That's like saying you could have a Big 12 football game with no officials on the field. Trust the players and the coaches to settle their own disagreements and call the fouls and assess penalties on themselves.

All three of these temptations present tough choices because they seem to pit one good against another. It's a story about Jesus and his tough choices, and it's also a story about us. Consider a few examples.

It seems right to protect the endangered spotted owl in the old-growth forest of the American Northwest and also right to provide jobs for people in the lumber industry.

It is right to provide our children with the finest public schools available and also 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 that Jesus faced?

First, this story says that being committed to following the way of God in your daily life does not exempt you from facing tough choices and alluring temptations. The Bible story states that Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness." His tough choices came about because he was 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 difficult choices you will have to make.

Second, you learn from this story that facing tough decisions is a sign of strength, not weakness. You are usually tempted to do that which is within your capacity. The greater the capacities, the greater the temptations.

Here's an individual who has a tremendous natural talent for leadership and for putting complicated deals together that attract investors. She will face some tough choices in how these gifts are to be used.

The fierceness of the struggle is a testimony to Jesus' power. The tempter does not waste time on weaklings. It is the very good and the most highly capable who face the toughest choices.

I repeat, what this story emphasizes is that the most difficult ethical decisions you face do not usually involve a situation where there is a clear choice between good and evil, but a choice that seems to pit one good against another good. Most of us are never tempted to commit armed robbery. But there are situations that involve small and large sums of money where choices have to be made, where accounting principles have to be examined and the ethical issues are not completely clear. Those who make the deals have convinced themselves that they are doing nothing illegal and are doing good.

Third, Jesus was able to make the right choice in each of his tough dilemmas because he had an ethical context from his religious tradition that helped him examine his choices. When he was tempted to turn the stones into bread to feed the hungry and feed himself, he recalled his religious tradition, which taught, "Human beings do not live by bread alone." And when the tempter told him that he could be a world ruler with extraordinary power, he recognized the temptation to worship power and worldly glory instead of the one true God. He recalled the commandment, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."

He also knew from that ethical context, with its religious foundation, that when you face a difficult choice, you always need to ask, "Am I taking this road mostly because it is a shortcut, 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 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 have given you?' That's the easy one. The second is tougher, 'For whom did you do it?'" Amen.