

Healed by Temptation

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship

on February 14, 2021

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

Happy Valentine's Day! How odd it is to offer that greeting in this church which is famous throughout our little corner of the world for its annual Valentine Tea on this day when the Tea is not happening for the first time in 25 years. Usually everyone here for worship would be checking their watches throughout the service, reminding me – whether they realized it or not – to pick up the pace because there was so much to do! The Hall would be filled with hearts everywhere – in the balloon centerpieces and table decorations, on the walls and even in the heart-shaped cookies. The tables would be set with all the beautiful china tea cups, lovingly matched and placed on the tables just so. And the tables themselves would be crammed into the Hall as we waited for the guests to arrive and take their seats. Yes, Happy Valentine's Day for sure – but it's just not quite the same this year, is it? No, not hardly. But let's not surrender to the temptation to be sad. Life happens and this whole Coronavirus mess is just the reality of our lives right now. But it won't be forever and that's what we need to focus on.

This Valentine's Day is also noteworthy for another reason. This year it is the last Sunday before Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. I was thinking about this when I was in CVS to pick a prescription yesterday and noticed all the Valentine displays conveniently located right near the front-end registers. Has anyone else noticed there are more hearts in the candy section than the cards section these days? Seriously, there was literally an entire row of Russel Stover candy filled hearts in at least five different sizes. I noticed this oddity when I briefly considered picking up one for our family to share as a little Valentine's celebration. I didn't though because I realized it wouldn't be fair to the family. As I was contemplating size, I realized I didn't want to tempt Peter or Jack or myself for that matter with a lovely and inviting box of Valentine candy just sitting there on the table. Peter is supposed to be on a special cardiac diet. Jack is really trying to hold on tight to his diabetic diet which has recently slipped a bit from his grasp. And me? Well, I have a relationship with chocolate that can be downright dangerous if encouraged too much. So, I forced myself to almost

jog past all that delightful candy. I also resisted the temptation to buy one of those adorable heart-shaped cakes in the grocery store. I skipped right over the Valentine cookies and even those little candy hearts with the goofy sayings on them. Yes, dear ones, I resisted all the temptations Valentine's Day had to offer this year and, while I know it's a good thing, I admit I am not without regrets for those very healthy decisions. But, such is life, right?

As some of you may recall, I have been preaching each week during this Epiphanytide season on the subject of healing and we've considered a lot of aspects of healing in the preceding weeks. We've looked at healing generally and more specifically as life often brings us the need to heal in body, mind and soul. We've talked about grief and hope as they connect with healing. Last week we even talked about the need for healing as we look to the future. This week, our final one for our reflections on healing, will focus on a rather curious, almost tangential aspect of healing and that is the connection between healing and temptation. I know, right? What possible connection could there be between the wiles of temptation and healing? More than it appears on the surface, I think.

Of course, temptation is a direct lead-in to Lent, as our text from Matthew this morning makes clear. This is the well-known story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness at the conclusion of his 40 days and nights on his self-imposed "retreat" of sorts. This event, which appears in Mark and Luke as well as in Matthew, took place immediately following Jesus' baptism by John. It also serves as the biblical foundation for Lent when we are invited to set aside 40 days for contemplation of our own relationships with God. Mark merely mentions that Jesus did this in one sentence and then moves on. Matthew and Luke have remarkably similar accounts of what transpired, both of which hinge on the appearance to Jesus as the 40 days and nights were coming to an end of a seemingly sinister visitor. Matthew refers to this visitor as the devil, notably with a small "d," then as "the tempter" and finally as "Satan." Technically, the devil is a transcendent evil being (*New Oxford Study Bible*) which doesn't really tell us much about who this might be although "evil" is a pretty good clue. In fact, *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* defines the small "d" devil as an evil spirit. And we all know who Satan is, right? Again, *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* defines Satan as "the pre-eminent adversary ... with a disposition hostile to all goodness and the chief opponent of God and

man.” Okay then! We get it! This is a “bad dude” as the vernacular might describe him/her/whatever. Of course, if we dwell too long on this whole concept of a devil or Satan, we would inevitably encounter the slippery slope argument of theodicy, the theological concept of evil which poses this question: If God is all powerful and all good, why does the devil/Satan/whomever even exist? Why would God allow that to be the case? We could have quite the discussion on that, for sure! But that is a conversation for another day. This morning I would like us to use as our lens for reflection the third name Matthew uses for this being/whatever whom Jesus encounters at the end of his forty day fast in the wilderness. That name is the tempter.

I admit, this name for this being makes a whole lot of sense to me – the tempter. The devil or Satan – that just has a supernatural feel to it, doesn’t it? And, I don’t know about you, but I have no interest in even acknowledging that there is a divine or supernatural being out there whose whole purpose is evil and who is on an equal playing field with God. Again, we could have a whole other discussion on this notion but for now, let’s just focus on this evil being as the tempter. The tempter. That sounds like a human being to me. That sounds like the guy stocking all those Russell Stover Valentine Candy hearts in CVS or the server taking my take-out order at the restaurant literally saying, “Can I tempt you with dessert?” “Why, yes, yes you can!” my brain is screaming while my mouth somehow finds the will to say, “no, thank you.” Or what about the guy with the gambling addiction who stops to buy milk at the convenience and is confronted with the possibility of changing his luck with just one lottery ticket. Or the young meth addict who needs “just one more hit and then I’ll quit,” he says to the tempter pretending to be his friend. Or the Senator who freely admits the guilt of someone, after the fact, but claims a legal technicality is more important than justice, the temptation to make the difficult decision proving to be too much. Yes, the tempter – now that’s someone we know, someone we run into ourselves on a rather routine basis. So, it makes sense to hear that this tempter confronted Jesus.

And how does the tempter do this? He (or she – we assume it’s a guy but the text never says that) tempts Jesus to turn the stones at his feet into bread because he knows just how hungry Jesus must be. But Jesus isn’t falling for it! “One does not live by bread alone but by every word that

comes from the mouth of God” Jesus tells him. Then poof! Jesus finds himself perched precariously on the top of the highest pinnacle of the Temple where the tempter dares him to throw himself off for surely God’s angels will catch him. Again, Jesus doesn’t fall for it. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test,” he reminds his visitor. Then, as a last attempt, the tempter takes him to the highest mountain where he shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world with all their riches and he says, “All these I will give to you if will fall down and worship me.” This time Jesus gets angry and yells, “Away with you Satan! It is written “worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” And poof! The tempter is gone, replaced by angels who are there to feed Jesus. Wow! Some story, huh? The tempter tempts Jesus with food, with super human power and with wealth beyond all imagining and Jesus says no to it all. Well, of course he did, we think. He’s Jesus. That is the point of the story after all, that this is Jesus, the most unusual man, the most faithful man, the most miraculous man ever born so it is easy for us believe he is indeed God’s son. This story tells us who Jesus was in no uncertain terms – this is God’s Son and our role model. But our question for today is the connection between healing and temptation. Was Jesus healed by temptation? Are we ever healed by temptation?

I would argue that the answer to both those questions is a resounding “yes.” I think the whole reason Jesus ventured out into the wilderness is because he knew God was asking something of him but he wasn’t quite sure what that was or how God was expecting him to respond. We always assume Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, what he was saying, what he was teaching and perhaps the divine part of him did. But the human part? No, not hardly. Jesus spent those 40 days and nights out in the wilderness on his own personal pilgrimage of self-discovery. He needed to understand at the core of his being who he was and what he was supposed to do and only when he experienced this transformation, this healing of all his doubts and fears, only then could he emerge from the wilderness as the Savior God needed him to be. So was Jesus healed by this final experience of temptation, this final chance to cash in on the very human desire for food, for power and for riches? Yes, he was healed, finding in this moment that he was both confident and content with in his choices for how he would spend the rest of his life.

And what about us? Can we be healed by temptation? Yes, I think we can – and we are every day. Sometimes that healing is obvious and simple, like my refusal to give in to buying Valentine chocolates for my family, honoring healthy choices instead. Other times, that healing is much slower to be felt and experienced, much slower to even be recognized – like the decisions to upend our lives by making a decision that can change everything. Like finding within oneself the strength to leave a bad relationship or to turn away from an argument or to refuse to follow colleagues making a poor decision because it was the easy way out of a difficult and painful situation. Like giving oneself permission to say “no, I can’t do that” when we are stretched too thin. All of these healing moments come when we find the inner strength to say no to the temptation to take the path of least resistance, to make the easy choice instead of the one that takes effort to put into practice. Dear ones, recognizing when we are being tempted by the circumstances of life to be less than God created us to be is the first step to healing for body, mind and soul.

But, this healing from temptation is so much more than simply practicing the art of healthy decision making. Healing from temptation is really about seeing yourself, just as you are, as a beloved child of God worthy of only the best life has to offer. Healing from the temptation to be your own worst enemy which, let’s admit, is so easy to do, is nothing less than God’s desire for us every single day of our lives. Dear ones, we are so very good at pointing out our own shortcomings, our own faults, that we forget how special we are to God, how beloved we are of God. Healing from temptation is, at its most basic, an invitation to move beyond criticism of ourselves and others to embodying the “greatest commandment” which Jesus taught: to love God with all that we are and all that we have, and to love the other as much as we love ourselves. Dear ones, Jesus is reminding us very clearly here that in order to love others we must first love God and then we must love ourselves as ourselves. Healing from the temptation not to love is where all healing truly begins. Challenging for sure. But, if it was easy, anyone could do it. And you are definitely not just anyone. Jesus knows that. Do you? Amen.