

Temptation
02/18/18

The new minister had just moved into town. It was late at night when his wife remembered that their dog, very aptly named “Trouble”, had not been taken out. Since most of the neighbors were asleep, she just slipped on her robe, put the dog on a leash and stepped out the back door. Unfortunately, the leash slipped out of her hand, and the dog took off to explore the new territory. She ran around the house, hoping to see which direction he had gone. Just then a police car was passing by and stopped to see if she needed help. “No, thank you,” she replied, “I’m just out here looking for trouble.”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could fight off temptation like Jesus did, if we could avoid the trouble our temptations get us into? Wouldn’t it be great if we could say to ourselves: no thank you, I really don’t want to have that treat; I really don’t want to go to that place I should avoid; I really don’t want to get angry or frustrated or impatient. I’d really rather not do those things because I know I’m not supposed to and therefore I’ll just avoid doing them, because I know they’ll get me into trouble. Wouldn’t it be great if life were that simple?

Author William Bausch offers the following illustration: a very overweight man decided to lose several pounds and went on a diet. He even changed the route he usually drove to work so as to avoid passing his favorite bakery. One morning not long into his diet, he arrived at his office with a large, sugary, calorie-loaded cake. Surprised by his lack of resolve, his fellow workers chided him.

“What could I do?” the man explained as he described how, by force of habit, he had driven by the bakery and seen the trays loaded with goodies in the window. “I decided that this was no accident that I happened to pass this way, so I prayed, ‘Lord, if you really want me to have one of those delicious cakes, let me find a parking space right in front of the bakery.’ And sure enough, on the ninth time around the block, there it was!”

That's certainly an interesting and somewhat amusing story, but if we think about it, it might be similar to our story. What's not amusing is that stories like these, where we bargain with God for favors, often lead to incidents which convey the rest of the story.

Before we know it, we're slipping into infidelity in our marriage, dishonesty in our finances, lying to hide the truth and irresponsibility in our conduct. "Get me out of this jam and I swear I'll never drink again," we say. Or "Let me win this one jackpot and I'll never gamble again." Or I'll never overeat again. Or I'll never do whatever again. All we need do is fill in the blank with our own personal temptation. Peter Gomes suggests temptation should not be seen as a game of manipulation but a serious encounter with our sub-conscious.

He recommends that to emerge from temptation without it leading to sin, we should consider four alternatives. First, we name the temptation. Second, we name the tempter. This helps us avoid attempts at rationalizing the sin, as in, "I had to embezzle to pay the hospital bills."

Third, we practice resistance. Moral training, like any other training, takes practice and discipline to acquire and master. Fourth, when all else fails, we call for help. Relying on our own willpower will sometimes lead to disaster, to giving in to the temptation. And so we share our struggle with a friend, a mentor, a confessor.

We cannot deny the existence of evil but we can see our struggles as graced and positive experiences. We are challenged to accept, endure, and emerge from temptation as changed people, humbler but stronger, more aware of the presence and power of God in our lives. Lent is a good time to reexamine and call into question our attitudes, our values and our assumptions.

Picking up on what Gomes recommends, we name the temptation, we name the tempter, we practice resistance, and/or we call for help. Let's use this first Sunday of Lent as an opportunity to begin that process with our worst temptations. Maybe then we'll stay out of trouble.