

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 5, April 10, 2011, dedicated to Jane Werum on her birthday, to David and Martha Loy as they established a new home this week, and always to the glory of God!

“Lead Us Not Into Temptation” *

Matthew 6:13a
(Part VI of VIII in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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“Lead us **not** into temptation.” The Lord’s Prayer appeals to our God. This word “temptation” is often lost to us. Neil Douglas-Klotz in his book *Prayers of the Cosmos*, translates the prayer from the Aramaic, the original language of Jesus. “Lead us not into temptation translates: *“Don’t let us enter into . . . that which diverts us from the inner purpose of our lives.”* In the Greek, the word “temptation” translates “test.” So temptation is not so much about getting caught up in evil as it is about having our strength and resolve being tested. Often, we hear, *“Lead us not into this time of testing.”*

We have come to a great and uplifting truth. What we call temptation is not meant to make us sin. It is not designed to make us fall. Temptation is designed to help us conquer sin and make us stronger and better women and men.

Temptation is not designed to make us bad, but it designed to make us good. It is not meant to weaken us, but through the ordeals and challenges of life's temptations, we emerge stronger, and finer and purer. We may fail in the test, but we are meant to. It is not so much the penalty of being human, but the glory - or manifestation - of being human.

Here we pause and ponder temptation's way. From where does temptation our "testing" come?

Sometimes temptation comes from outside ourselves.

We choose to take up with those whose behaviors and actions bring us no gain. They influence us in ways that lead us into mischief. They lead us into trouble we were not into before. We find ourselves tripping down an alley instead an avenue, where shadows prevail and light dims mightily. These tempters can take many different forms and characterizations. But, their influence cuts against the right we know within us. Often in a haze, we stumble. Often in the darkest night we fall. *Sometimes our testing comes OUTSIDE ourselves.*

Other times temptation comes from those who love us. Of all the temptations this is the hardest to fight. While the first temptation comes through shadows and mischief, this temptation has the appearance of not meaning to harm us in the slightest way. You may feel called to a certain place or certain vocation or career. But to follow that path may mean abandoning the successes the world names for you and your loved ones want for themselves - and maybe for you. To follow that path may be unpopular with your family and friends. Family counsels, cautions, dissuades you from the path to which you feel called. They want you to do well in a worldly sense, but sometime divine is stirring inside of you. "Stay with us," your loved ones beckon. But in time, you find the light inside you dying, because you have listened to the tempting voices close at hand. *Temptation can come from those closest to us.*

Temptation comes so often to the young. As young

men and women, we do not want to appear “holy” or “pious” or “better than others.” So, we skip church, reject the values which have formed the core of our being, flee from what we know to be good and seek company with what our parents and loved ones feel is not so good. We would rather be seen as daring, as adventurous and “bad” than as good and pure.

Not so saintly in his younger years, (known as a playboy by 4th century terms) Augustine of Hippo (now Algeria) wrote of his youthful endeavors in his famous book *Confessions*. By the time we get to know him, he is a saint! St. Augustine writes:

Among my equals I was ashamed of being less shameless than others, when I heard them boast of their wickedness . . . And I took pleasure not only in the pleasure of the deed but in the praise . . . I made myself worse than I was that I might not be reproached. And when in anything I had not sinned as the most abandoned ones, I would say that I had done what I had not done, that I might not seem contemptible.

Later, Augustine would admit that one of the greatest defenses against temptation is simply the courage to be good. *Temptation can come to the young.*

Temptation can also come from inside ourselves. If nothing inside of us could respond to temptation’s appeal, temptation would be helpless to defeat us. In every one of us there is a weak spot. Each one of our points of vulnerability differs. What might tempt one person leaves the person beside him or her completely unmoved or unaffected. Two people enter a casino with the same amount of cash. One spends it, loses it and stops. The other spends it, loses it and goes to the money machine, the bank or some lending operation for more to spend and lose and cannot stop. It is not the casino itself that causes temptation, but the trigger for gambling inside the heart and mind of one person is different than that in the heart and mind of another. In every person, the “Achilles heel,” or the weak spot, is tempter’s delight. Whatever the flaw, the fault of passion, the instinct, the quirk, the trigger,

the challenge is to be aware and on guard and on watch to keep it in check.

Like our fingerprints, each of us has a distinctive draw toward some temptation. For one person this may be a dream of glory, a lust or a craving that carries a person beyond himself or herself. For another, this trigger in the heart and mind may be a temptation to never reach or stretch or try for something higher or further beyond what is safe.

Carl Jung referred to the “other side of self” as the “shadow.” In Jungian psychology, the **shadow** or **shadow aspect** is a part of the unconscious mind consisting of repressed weaknesses, shortcomings, and instincts. Jung wrote, “Everyone carries a shadow and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.”

According to Jung, the shadow, in being instinctive and irrational, is prone to projection. That is, we turn a personal inferiority into a perceived moral deficiency or flaw in someone else. Jung wrote that if these projections are unrecognized, “the projection-making factor then has a free hand and can realize its object – if it has one – or bring about some other situation characteristic of its power.” When we are tempted into projections on others, these projections insulate and cripple us by forming an ever thicker fog of illusion between our egos and the real world (drawn from Wikipedia on Carl Jung and *The Shadow*.)

In other words, what we struggle with in ourselves we can project onto the other as wrong in them, when in fact, it is our issue, our struggle, our challenge. The temptation is still inside us, but it shows itself outside our self. *Temptation can come from within us.*

If temptation doesn't come from outside ourselves, from those close to us, when we are young or from inside ourselves at our most vulnerable point, **we can find ourselves tempted at our strongest points**, which is the paradox of temptation.

History is full of examples of castles that fell because no guard was placed at the strongest section of the wall. They didn't think it necessary. What is your strongest point? Temptation may slip right past it. Be on guard.

Temptation is something we ask God to lead us out of and away from every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. It is there for us in every imaginable way in every day. Perhaps we would do well to simply learn a few defenses against its inevitable presence in our lives.

First, learn to love and respect yourself. Learn to say "no" to things that tear you down and "yes" to things that build you up. It sounds so simple. And maybe it is. Time and time again in the scriptures when Jesus is faced with the Tempter, the Devil (you know, the "one who seeks to trip him), he simply and directly says, "BE GONE." He does this with the full knowledge that old Mr. Satan will be back. Treating the devil like flies on a summer picnic table, Jesus shoos him off! Maybe it is that simple. Try it! I have found it works more often than you would expect.

Second, trust the strength of your roots and traditions. Some of us come from deep and rich roots and traditions – in our families, our churches, our spiritual lives. When faced with temptation's snare, trust your roots. The rocks of our lives are real. Hang on to them in the floods of life. If however, you have no roots and traditions, may I recommend some? Get anchored in the power of prayer, the glory of God's word and the presence of worship. Jesus calls us to travel with him through the valley of the shadow and fear no evil, for he is with us. With Jesus as your ground of being, you will stand on sure and steady footing. He is an anchor in the storms of life. He is our rock and our salvation, as my opening prayer lifts up each week. If you need roots and traditions, a rock and an anchor, I highly recommend our Savior!

In defending against temptation, seek also a good

therapist or a good spiritual director – or both. Some of us call ourselves stoic. We believe we can figure everything out all by ourselves. Left to the devises and desires of our own hearts and minds, we think we can work everything out by ourselves. We too often think we can work out our own salvation. But in reality, the stoics are extinct. Seek a listening ear and a questioning voice. Seek a healthy person who has dedicated himself or herself to spiritual and mental and emotional health and well-being.

In overcoming temptation in the desert, Jesus vanished his tempter with “BE GONE!” but he was also ministered to and saved by angels who came and cared for him. Even the Son of God didn’t make it on his own. What makes us think we are better than Jesus? Seek the angels whose hearts and minds are present and loving. You will find all of the good ones have angels who attend to them as well.

Also, listen to family and friends. While we discovered earlier, they may lead us away from discovering our true calling, they are also the ones who have been there for us from the earliest days of our lives. Trust that they care more deeply about you than sometimes they even know.

Finally, remember in facing temptation that you are never alone. Jesus is more than a heroic figure in old book. He is a living presence in the real world. St Patrick understood this. He wrote this and we refer to it today as St. Patrick’s Breastplate. Let us count on the power of the Trinity and the presence of our Christ to bind us to God’s love and deliver us from temptation.

I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.
I bind this day to me for ever.
By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in the Jordan River;

His death on Cross for my salvation;
His bursting from the spicèd tomb;
His riding up the heavenly way;
His coming at the day of doom;*
I bind unto myself today.
I bind unto myself the power
Of the great love of the cherubim;
The sweet 'well done' in judgment hour,
The service of the seraphim,
Confessors' faith, Apostles' word,
The Patriarchs' prayers, the Prophets' scrolls,
All good deeds done unto the Lord,
And purity of virgin souls.
I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the starlit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.
I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need.
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide, His shield to ward,
The word of God to give me speech,
His heavenly host to be my guard.
Against the demon snares of sin,
The vice that gives temptation force,
The natural lusts that war within,
The hostile men that mar my course;
Or few or many, far or nigh,
In every place and in all hours,
Against their fierce hostility,
I bind to me these holy powers.
Against all Satan's spells and wiles,
Against false words of heresy,

Against the knowledge that defiles,
Against the heart's idolatry,
Against the wizard's evil craft,
Against the death wound and the burning,
The choking wave and the poisoned shaft,
Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning.
Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.
I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity;
By invocation of the same.
The Three in One, and One in Three,
Of Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Bind yourself to Christ Jesus. He will lead you, not into temptation, but into deliverance from evil – but that is next week's sermon. Amen.

* Thanks to William Barclay's commentary on Matthew in writing on temptation. Barclay is quoted freely throughout this sermon.