**Temptation**

Psalm 32, Matthew 4:1-11

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Like most people my age, growing up I liked to read the comic strips in the newspaper each day. But my favorite day was Sunday when they had their own full color section. I could take the section open it up and lay on the floor and read it to my heart’s content.

I especially loved the comic strip “Garfield”. There was something about this round orange and black cat with the cynical, out for himself attitude, with love for lasagna, and who hated to get out of bed in the morning that appealed to me (probably mostly that last part as I wished I too could smash my ringing alarm clock into pieces as he did). Garfield’s attitude towards mostly clueless owner Jon and Jon’s other pet Odie, an over eager to please dog, was mostly one of hardly veiled disgust. Garfield reflects that stereotypical attitude often associated with cats- I don’t need you except to feed me. It’s one of aloofness, and disregard for others wants as well as needs. It may be your lasagna for dinner, but if you’ve made the mistake of stepping away from it for a minute, it’s fair game. And that doesn’t matter if the lasagna is still in the oven.

One Sunday strip displays this attitude. Garfield is shown coming upon a donut sitting on a table. After viewing it with surprise, the next panel shows his left paw slyly starting to reach for it as his eyes shift to the right to see if Jon or anyone else is watching- probably ready to blame the donut disappearance on poor Odie. Suddenly over his right shoulder appears an angel- well an angel donut actually- complete with white frosting and halo. “Don’t eat that poor defenseless donut! “Then in the next panel- poof- appears a devil donut complete with red horns “Don’t listen to him pal! Chow down!” The angel donut -there’s a phrase I thought I’d never say in a sermon- the angel donut counters- “Do what is right! Do what is in your heart.” The next to last panel depicts Garfield starting intently at the donut on the plate, pondering what to do while the angel and devil donut hover over his shoulders. The last panel gives us the aftermath of his decision. Not only are there only crumbs left from the donut, but from the remnants of the angel and devil donuts too.

While I believe it was the only time that it appeared in the form of a donut, it wasn’t the last time Garfield is depicted struggling between choices with the trope of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. It’s a trope because it illustrates so well that feeling of being caught in the middle; of being pulled to one side or the other within ourselves or by outside factors and people between what we know is right and an easier way.

Jesus finds himself in a much more serious tug of war between these two in today’s gospel reading. Here Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist. Upon coming out of the water the sky opens up, the Spirit descends, and Jesus hears the voice of God tell him “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

We start today immediately after in the story: with droplets of water still dripping from his hair, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for a time of fasting and prayer. At the end of 40 days, a tempter appears, called the devil here, and starts taunting Jesus “If you are the Son of God…” He challenges Jesus, first to turn the rocks into bread, then to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple to test God’s love, then finally offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would only worship the devil instead. Jesus rebuts each temptation with a quote from Scripture until defeated, the tempter leaves, and angels appear to tend to Jesus.

The three temptations that Jesus faces here- turn rocks to bread, jump off a pinnacle so angels must catch you, and worship the devil in order to become King of the world- are not ones that we are going to face in our lives. However, they are all the manifestation of underlying temptations that we all face. They can represent a wide array of temptations, taken together or separately, such as to grab power through spectacle rather than substance, take the easy way, trust ourselves over God’s love for us, and more. Depending on where we are in our life journey, they may resonate differently at the time. I don’t believe there is a right or wrong way to describe what these temptations are about- only different ways that can be just as true as the other.

So as I read this passage this time, I noticed one temptation summarized by all three of these. What jumped out at me in reading this text this time is that these are all things that are done at distance. Change all the rocks to bread throughout the land, and all you need to do is send the hungry people out to gather it. Jump off the peak of the temple to be caught by angels in the heart of Jerusalem and no one would be able to deny who he was- think of the spectacle. Be given the complete power to accomplish what he wants to help others through legislating and decrees, and all he has to do is worship the tempter.

The temptation that Jesus faces here is the temptation to do things at a distance from people. If he “make” things happen, he literally doesn’t have to get his hands dirty touching all those people, fishing with the disciples. He doesn’t have to eat with those smelly lepers, immoral prostitutes and tax collectors, sleep in uncomfortable places. He won’t have to put up with all that pushback- the arguments, the degrading comments about his character, be laughed at.

And he won’t be hurt; physically when he is first flogged then executed. But he also won’t be hurt by betrayal, or rejection by those who he’s trying to help. He won’t have to feel the pain of those who will come to him seeking healing for lifelong illnesses. He won’t have to endure the people considered outcasts and “other” whose loneliness and despair permeate their lives. If he takes this path, the injustices of the world won’t touch him, he needn’t experience them.

None of these require compassion. None of these require empathy. None of these require love. Which, frankly, can be tempting. Because love can hurt. When someone betrays you or intentionally tries to inflict pain on you that hurts. He can avoid the hurt involved in compassion as you recognize another’s pain. The hurt that comes when relations are strained. When the one loved is sick, or dies, or just leaves.

And loving, caring on a broader societal scale can hurt as well: as we are frustrated when changes in systems and institutions are blocked, or reversed. When we receive judgement and ridicule for what we believe, our acceptance of others. We might lose friends, have family over what we believe or do. There is the pain that comes from empathizing with person and person as you listen to their story of sorrow, injustices, and struggles, and wonder what you can do.

And so we act to make sure we don’t feel those hurts- we get angry and feed that until the rage is all we see when we look at another. Or we withdraw, find a safe space within ourselves or place in the world where we can lock the door, and never have to open it again- live literally in our own little world. The temptation is to apathy, expressed through resignation that says “nothing will every change”, “it’s not my problem”, blaming the other, or denying there is even anything wrong.

Author Belinda Bauman shares in her book “Brave Souls: Sharing the Audacious Power of empathy the three dysfunctional ways she had used to avoid empathy, in her words, to avoid love.

“ First, I would reach for *sympathy*, a quick fix to relieve [guilt](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/guilt). Sympathy says, “I really care, but I really don’t need to know,” and does very little to actually help the situation.

* Then, I would reach for *apathy* or camouflaged indifference. Apathy says, “I know, but I don’t really care.” It informs itself and may even diagnose the issues, but remains distant, even if only emotionally, from the person who suffers.
* Finally, if nothing else was working, I would reach for *antipathy*, justifying my [anger](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/anger) somehow. Antipathy says, “I don’t know, and I don’t care.” In the end, antipathy is just self-righteousness, and usually aggravates the suffering of others.”

She writes of how that changed through her experience with a woman she met in the Congo, She ended up in the Congo because of a news headline she saw on mother’s Day. “Ah, yes. Mother’s Day, 2013. While my two boys were trundling up the stairs to bring me breakfast, my husband, Stephan, quietly slipped the day’s newspaper next to my eggs. The headline read, “Congo: The Worst Place in the World to Be a Mother…I’m always up for being the activist, but I remember thinking, This is Mother’s Day! I ended up crying into my coffee.”

A year later, she was in the Congo, listening to the stories of women’s suffering through the decades long war. There were the normal horrors of war, as well as missing loved ones, and enduring repeated sexual assaults. One woman, Esperance, was illiterate so asked her priest to write her story on a piece of paper. Esperance then added her thumbprint to the paper and handed it to Belinda and asked Belinda to share her story, make sure it was told so other might not have to go through this same pain.

This wasn’t the first time Belinda had heard such stories, she had covered hundreds of these as a journalist. This time, however, she felt Esperance’s pain herself. But she also was moved by her handling of her suffering, wanting to use it so others would know.

This is because, she writes “Engaging in another person’s story means sacrificing our own comfort—our privilege actually—and embracing the very real pain of others. But offering empathy and holding space with suffering people requires more than courage. It requires us to genuinely connect. But the more we connect, the more we experience another’s pain…. Because genuine empathy requires us to reach into our own experiences and touch, at least in some part, the places we have also suffered, we may be tempted to pull back.

Despite that need to touch our pain, Belinda urges to resist the temptation to stand back. “My hope for our future, that brave souls everywhere will take the ultimate risk to love like Esperance—leaning into our own pain, and the pain of others, so that we can all share in the hope that one day we will not only weep with those who weep, but be first in line to rejoice with those who rejoice.”

Jesus resisted the temptation to pull back. He wept with those who wept. He stood with them, felt their pain, as indication that God does the same. He could do so because he himself stood squarely in the assurance of God’s love.

The temptation to pullback is real, and *understandable*. But so is the reality that we can resist that temptation and stand with and for others in their struggle. We can stand with them, speak out for them, because God does not pull God’s love from them or from us.

Jesus wept with those who wept, but he also rejoiced with those who rejoiced. We are invited to do the same. Amen.