

Temptation and Evil
Wednesday, April 1, 2009
Ephesians 6:12-19; Matthew 12:23-28

For many of us, temptation has more to do with the "battle of the bulge" than with "the spiritual forces of evil." Pizza, chocolate, and an occasional drink come to mind, not the flaming darts of the evil one. Other temptations also seem pretty tame: Playing hooky on Opening Day; telling white lies; or web-surfing on the job.

Some temptations, though, are tough to resist, because they're so intertwined with our sin and brokenness. Addiction comes to mind, as does revenge. Power, wealth, and pleasure are obvious temptations. But some things tempt more subtly. Acceptance; knowledge; security: these are good in moderation but aren't we sometimes tempted to seek more, more and more, regardless of the consequences? Someone said the devil's favorite question is: "Don't you want a little more?"

Lead us not into temptation. Maybe if we prayed this *before* we asked God for forgiveness, we wouldn't have to ask so often! It feels weird, though, to pray "don't let us be led into temptation," and then *immediately* to add, "And deliver us from the Evil One." That's the word used, though: not just "deliver us from evil, but from *the Evil One.*" I admit it: I start thinking of Flip Wilson's character Geraldine, who famously excused her misdeeds by saying, "The devil made me do it!"

But even that reminds me that there's more to evil than just "Compost happens." There's also an uncanny and inhuman intentionality about evil. The Church follows Jesus' lead in speaking of *the Evil One*. And one thing He soberly tells His Church is that the Evil One uses temptation like a weapon. We needn't imagine a cloven-hoofed gremlin in a red union suit poking us with his pitchfork; we can usually ignore sensational descriptions of demonic possession, complete with levitation and 360-degree head twists. After all, Jesus battled the Evil One in a deceptively simple conversation in the wilderness. He found the devil's words sharp enough weapons! In his book *Deliver Us From Evil*, Rev. Phillip Gagnon writes: "Our battle is not fought in the sensational realm but in the mundane affairs of life, in the muck and grime of everyday transgressions against God and neighbor - *where we are tempted to say no to God and yes to our own self-centered inclinations.*"

Isn't that at the heart of even our littlest, most harmless surrenders to temptation? *It's always about us!* Another Lutheran, the late Dr. Gerhard Forde, observed that "as sinners, we are like addicts - *addicted to ourselves and our own projects.*" And Rev. Gagnon adds, "It is my conviction that subsequent temptations are increasingly difficult to resist. Habitual sin becomes closer than an old friend, and we are equally reluctant to let go. If we are honest with ourselves, there are moments in our lives when we plan to 'get away' with some secret sin, to

indulge ourselves. We count on God's forgiveness to see us through our next dalliance with sin. Every instance of giving in to sin's temptations erodes within our soul the barrier between good and evil. When Satan gains entry into the living room of our hearts he unpacks his bags, making himself at home. After all, to a certain extent he is family."

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Yes, they're that serious and they're that interconnected. James, brother of our Lord, says this about the relationship between temptation and evil:

Tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it: then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.

We don't realize that, *whenever* we face temptation, it's a skirmish in a deadly battle with an implacable enemy who uses every possible means to pry us away from God. The Evil One turns our desires, longings, hurts and weaknesses into weapons against us. Who needs special effects, after all, if you can make someone else do your dirty work? If we're not totally willing accomplices, the enemy uses our guilt against us, accusing us and telling us that we're beyond God's forgiveness. One highly-respected Roman Catholic exorcist - yes, exorcists still exist - says *that's* the ultimate goal of the devil. "Satan's *true* goal is not to make you suffer or to harm you. He wants our defeated soul to say, 'Enough. I am defeated; I am a piece of clay in the hands of evil.

God cannot liberate me. God forgets his children if he allows such suffering. God does not love me; evil is greater than he is.' *This is the true victory of evil.*"

Thus Jesus teaches His Church to pray - not in fear or dismay, and certainly not in despair, but with boldness, confidence, and faith: *Father, do not let us be led into temptation; but deliver us from the Evil One.* The danger is real. Evil is real. But contrary to the father of lies' chief deception, our Heavenly Father *does* love us. He *does* liberate us. He *does* remember us. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is immeasurably greater than the Evil One; He has dealt Satan a death-blow through the death of His Son on the Cross. That gracious act sums up God's love for us, even when we are most in bondage to sin, evil and death. As Rev. Gagnon puts it, the Passion of Our Lord *is the great exorcism of humanity. The devil and the demons cannot bear to see {the Cross} because it is the seal of their destruction and the redemption of all who believe and are baptized in the name of the Triune God.*

Because of that truth, Martin Luther could bluntly say: "Mr. Devil, do not rage so. Just take it easy! For there is one who is called Christ. In Him I believe. He has abrogated the law, damned sin, abolished death, and destroyed hell. And he is *your* devil, you devil, because he has captured and conquered you, so that you cannot harm me any longer or anyone else who believes in him."

It's poetic justice that Jesus, who bedevils the devil, allowed himself to be subject to the worst that sin, death and the devil could throw at him. He took on frail human flesh; suffered bodily torment and spiritual temptation; and bore the consequences of every human being's yielding to temptation. Satan used our human limitations and weaknesses as weapons to defeat us. Jesus, like a judo master, used those very weapons against Satan to defeat him! St. John Chrysostom said it was as if Jesus in his human flesh became the nice juicy bait on the fish-hook of the Cross. The devil in his pride took the bait without noticing the hook - and swallowed a very bitter spike indeed.

Now *we* don't become superhumanly strong in our own being, able to resist temptation and stand fast against the power of sin without outside aid. Nor does Jesus tell us to ask for that. No, we're still puny little ol' us, seemingly easy prey for "Mr. Devil." But we're given formidable protection. Our first defense seems almost comic: when we're baptized, *we're* hung like juicy bait right there with Jesus! But His Cross is traced on our forehead; His Spirit is poured into our hearts; and His Father claims us as His children. That leads to another case of acid indigestion for "Mr. Devil" whenever he comes calling on us.

Next, *we're* clothed in wondrous armor and given weapons not of our own devising, as St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: *Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate*

of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Faith, truth, and righteousness; the Gospel; the Spirit; the holy sacraments; prayer. These are not only weapons and protection; they are powerful reminders of the one thing from which temptation distracts us, and which the Evil One most desires that we should forget: and that is that God so loves us that he has given his only-begotten Son, so whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The Lord's Prayer as Jesus taught ends here; but the Church soon added: *For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.* We constantly pray to the One who clothes us in the righteousness of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity; who arms us with the sword of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity; who stands with us in our everyday struggles with temptation and sin, and who announces victory on the front lines of battle against evil in all its forms.

Do not let us be led into temptation; but deliver us from the Evil One, for YOURS is the Kingdom... This is a cry of triumph. "The devil hates to give ground to the Kingdom of God," Rev. Gagnon concludes, "but ultimately he cannot help but do so. The light has indeed entered the darkness, and the darkness *cannot* overcome it. This is the Good News that the dark kingdom cannot bear to hear: Jesus *is* Lord and his Kingdom *will* have no end." Amen.