

Sermon 1 Lent, Year A  
 February 10, 2008  
 St. John's Episcopal Church  
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### The Temptations of Strength

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."*  
 Matthew 4:1-3

The last time my sister came to visit, we had a conversation about books. She's not a big reader. And when she does read a book, she gets rid of it as soon as she's finished, not wanting to clutter her life with books she has no use for. I, on the hand, am tempted by books, as Eve was tempted by the apple. And I almost never get rid of a book I've read. Who knows when I might need it again? My sister doesn't understand this. When she was here, she walked around our house counting bookcases. Then she saw my office here at church. "You have got to be kidding," she said, looking at the wall of books. "Why do you hold onto so many books?"

I had to think about it for awhile, and truth be told, there are a lot of books I should never have bought and could easily part with. But I tried to explain to my sister how certain books have changed my life, when at just the right moment a book came to me with whatever it was I needed to learn. I could never part with those books, I told her. "Okay," she said, looking at me the way she does sometimes, as if she's wondering what planet I'm from.

Now if she had asked me for example of a book that changed me, which she didn't, and if I had had the courage to tell her what it was like for me growing up as her younger sister, which I didn't, I would taken from my shelf a book entitled, *Cinderella and Her Sisters*, written by Ann Ulanov, a professor of Psychiatry and Religion. It's a book about the experience of envy, an emotion I've struggled a lot with in my life, particularly in relationship to my sister. When I read it, now over 20 years ago, it changed my life.

Ulanov writes about the experience of envy from the perspective of both the envied and the envier: "Envy is a displacement of our own relationship to what is good." When we envy the good things or attributes of another person, we lose sight of a similar potential for goodness within us that is in need of attention, so that it, too, might develop. Instead, envy causes us to focus on the goodness of another, wishing on some level to destroy it, as if its existence somehow diminished our own.

The experience of being envied is equally painful, according to Ulanov. One feels both the attack and the threat to relationship. To preserve relationship, the envied one will often attempt to deny the very goodness that he or she has worked hard to achieve or has received by grace, to pretend that it isn't real. But then goodness is lost on both sides. For no matter how much the envied one relinquishes, the envier will feel the same aching

emptiness until his or her own relationship to goodness is put right. That is an internal process, unrelated to the absence or presence of goodness in another.<sup>1</sup>

Through this book, I learned that for all the pain of envy, it is also a gift. We can receive no stronger indication of what needs our attention within ourselves than what we envy in another. And if we can turn envy's energy inward, we find the impetus we need to address the things we otherwise ignore. Only then does envy lose its power to destroy relationship, for we can see the one we envy as a whole person again, not merely the embodiment of what we want but do not have.

I speak of envy and its displaced relationship to goodness today as an analogy, in light of the story of Jesus' struggle with temptation in the wilderness. For as with envy, I believe there is a similar relationship of displacement between temptation and strength.

We tend to think of temptation in relationship to our weaknesses, for good reason. Where we are weak, particular temptations can be devastating. That is why, for example, 12-step programs always emphasize the importance of knowing your vulnerabilities. A friend of mine gave up drinking last summer, not because she abused alcohol, but she realized that whenever she drank, even one glass of wine, she was much likely to light up a cigarette or eat a box of cookies. So she quit drinking as a way of avoiding the temptation to smoke or overeat. And it worked.

Temptation in relationship to weakness is real. But I wonder if temptation's greater power is in relationship to our strengths, the places where we are powerful, capable of significant influence. Seen from this perspective, temptation becomes not something to avoid but rather to understand, as a clue, revealing our power and giftedness.

Consider the story of Jesus' temptation. The Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness of his temptation right after his baptism, a glorious moment of affirmation and promise. Going to the wilderness, Jesus possessed great power and he knew it; he had felt power flowing through him. He had a tremendous sense of connection to God and an emerging clarity of vocation. And Satan came not tempting with trivia, but with the best of human possibilities. The question thus is raised for those listening to the story: to what end would Jesus use his power?

How does anyone come to terms with strength and power? What are strength's particular temptations?

Abuse comes to mind first. Jesus was tempted to use his power to prove the existence of God, to prove that he was God. He was tempted to use his strength to acquire comfort, prestige and wealth for himself, a predictable pitfall, perhaps the most predictable. One can admire Satan for his persistence here, but hardly his creativity. For there are other ways those with power are tempted to abuse it that are more subtle and therefore even more difficult to recognize as the danger, and the sin, that they are.

Dag Hammarskold, the famed Swedish diplomat and Secretary General to the United Nations in the 1950s, wrote of a misuse of strength that we might recognize. He wrote of a time of confrontation with a man who was, by all accounts, impossible. "It wasn't that he didn't attend to his work," Hammarskold wrote. "On the contrary, he took endless pains over the tasks he was given. But his manner of behavior brought him into conflict with everybody, and in the end it began to have an adverse effect on everything

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<sup>1</sup> Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Cinderella & Her Sisters: The Envied and the Envyng* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

he had to do with. When the crisis came and whole truth had to come out, he laid the blame on us: in his conduct there was nothing, absolutely nothing above reproach. His self-esteem was so strongly bound up with his idea of innocence that one felt a brute as one demonstrated the contradictions in his defense and, bit by bit, stripped him naked before his eyes. But justice to others demanded it. When the last lie had been taken from him and we felt there was nothing more to be said, out it came with stifled sobs, ‘But why did you never help me, why didn’t you tell me what do? You knew that I always felt you were against me. And insecurity drove me further down the path for which you now condemn me. It’s been so hard—everything. One day, I remember, I was so happy; one of you said something I had produced was quite good . . .’

“So, in the end,” Hammarskold concluded, “we were, in fact, to blame. We had not voiced our criticisms, but we had allowed them to stop us from giving him a single word of acknowledgement, and in this way had barred every road to improvement. For it is always the stronger one who is to blame. We lack life’s patience and we try to eliminate a person from our sphere of responsibility all whose weaknesses irritate us.”<sup>2</sup> Our strength, if withheld or held over against those whose weaknesses we disdain, can be a channel of destruction in ways we may never realize.

Still another temptation in the face of strength is to deny it, for fear of its implications in relationship, or for the responsibility that strength carries. One thinks again of the response to envy, and how the envied person is attempted to deny goodness for the sake of relationship. So, too, with strength. For strength draws attack as flowers draw bees. Strength invites criticism. It’s one of the harshest things we do to one another—we look for and admire strength in another, and we relish in looking for the contradictions and vulnerabilities with which to bring a person down. Small wonder many that have strength choose not to exercise it, for fear of that kind of criticism. And yet what kind of sin of that—denying one’s strength for fear of what others might say? Rabbi Edwin Friedman used to say to groups of clergy, as a way to dispel the power of such critique, “What other people say about you when you’re not around is none of your business.”

There is a lot of responsibility that comes with strength. One could imagine Jesus returning from the wilderness and setting up a carpentry shop in Nazareth like his dad. Why take the risks that strength demands? The consequences for failure are so much greater the more strength and power we accept, and more people can be adversely affected by our mistakes or blindness. Who wouldn’t want to walk away from such responsibility? Yet again, what kind of triumph is that for the forces of darkness, if those given strength and gifts refuse to exercise them out of fear?

Which leaves me with one final temptation in the face of strength: we are more inclined to forget about God. In vulnerability and weakness, we know our need for God. But in strength, we forget and then imagine that we are on our own without God for guidance. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In Taylor Branch’s book about the Civil Rights Movement, *Parting the Waters*, he describes a turning point in Martin Luther King’s life and leadership. By King’s gifts for oratory and strength of character, he found himself at the helm of the Montgomery Bus boycott of 1956. He was pleased to be there and proud of the way his words helped galvanize people to such courageous action. The Negro leadership thought they could keep the boycott going for a few weeks,

but instead, as you recall, it lasted over year. Imagine keeping people off the buses—their only means of transportation—for that long. The logistical problems alone were a nightmare, not to mention the increasing hostility of the white community.

One morning King awoke to intense pressure all around him. The phone rang all day and into the night: hate calls and calls to complain about the carpool; calls of need and calls of crisis. “Images pressed in upon him,” Taylor writes, “the hatred of whites, the offended rectitude of the middle-class Negroes, the raw courage or neediness of the plain folk. . . . There was no heart large enough to satisfy all of them. King buried his face in his hands at the kitchen table. He admitted to himself that he was afraid, that the people would falter if they looked to him for strength. He did not evoke the name of God, but he spoke aloud as in prayer, ‘I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’ As he spoke, his fears began to melt away. He became aware of an inner voice telling him to do what he thought was right. It was for King, a 27-year old Baptist minister, the first transcendent experience of his life, one grounded in his limitations and nobility as a human being. ‘Do what you think is right,’ the voice said to him. ‘Trust your instincts. Trust your strength. And I will be with you.’”<sup>3</sup>

Surely Lent is a time to ponder our frailty as human beings and our need for redemption in places of brokenness and sin. But it may also be a time to ponder our strength and the temptations associated with strength: the potential for abuse; the tendency to write off people whose weaknesses we disdain; the tendency to deny strength for fear of failure or responsibility; and the temptation to forget God. It may be that God has endowed us with strength, gifts, and power for a reason, a purpose beyond our knowing.

One thing is certain and should give us pause: if we choose to follow our strengths, it will cost us more than we ever bargained for in terms of time, commitment and life intensity. But we may also experience a significance and clarity in our lives that we might otherwise miss. God working through weakness is one kind of grace. God working through strength is another kind altogether. It’s riskier. The stakes are higher. It’s something we have to choose and consciously pursue, in the face of great temptations to do otherwise.

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 62.