

A STONE'S THROW FROM TEMPTATION

Have you ever noticed how on some signs the message which was intended isn't the one that comes across? I was in a department store recently and there was a sign that read: "Bargain Basement next level up." My favorite is actually a mistranslation; at least I hope it was. I'm pretty sure that the sign at a motel I once stayed at was supposed to say valuables but instead it read: "Please leave your values at the front desk." Unfortunately, many people do that without being told. And sometimes we are tempted to leave our values somewhere else, too. Jesus faced that kind of temptation every day.

This morning we begin our Lenten Journey with Jesus, we travel with Him into the wilderness where He was tempted over and over again. Here these words from the gospel of Luke 4:1-14. One of the unique things about the temptations is they are recorded in Matthew and Mark with just as much detail, which says to me that Jesus shared his struggle in the wilderness with the disciples. He wanted both them and us to know that he faced the same Temptations we face every day.

One of those areas of temptation is in the integrity department. It's a temptation we face every day. Every day we are tempted to make little decisions about what is right and wrong. It may be nothing more than running a red light because there isn't anyone around to see or shaving a stroke off your golf game or taking advantage of a checkout when they give you back too much change. It's not always the big things that get us into trouble. It's all the little things, the little steps that lead us away from living in the center of our core values.

The movie "The Legend of Bagger Vance is about a mythical golf match in the 1930's between golf legends Bobby Jones, Walter Hagen and a hometown ace Randolph Junuh. As a teenager Junuh had Tiger Woods kind of skill and was destined to become something huge. But after World War I, he comes back home changed and haunted. He tries to exorcise his demons through a reclusive life of alcohol and gambling.

His former girlfriend persuades him to join the match between the two greats to add some local flavor. While hitting practice balls one night, a transient caddy by the name of Bagger Vance enters Junuh's life, offers to help get him ready for the match and in the process helps him rediscover his passion for the game.

On the final hole of the 72 hole match, Junuh hits his tee shot into the woods. He walks into the woods with Bagger and his ten-year-old junior caddy. As he is examining the difficulty of his next shot he moves some twigs and his ball moves, which is an automatic one stroke penalty. He owns up

to it right away. Hardy, the ten-year-old, who is desperate for his hero to win say: “No, don’t do it. Only you and me seen it. I won’t tell a soul. Cross my heart. No one will know.” Junuh looks at Hardy and says, “I will Hardy and so will you. Hardy begins to plead to Bagger, “You gotta tell him not to do it.” But Bagger says, “That’s a choice for Mr. Junuh, Hardy.”

While Junuh ponders what to do, onlookers tempt him to lie. Even the referee tries to convince the young man that his guilt is misplaced. But Junuh confesses and continues his game with integrity. He then steps up and hits an incredible shot, out of the woods and onto the green just feet from the hole.

You can almost hear the words of Jesus to the Tempter in the background, “We do not live by bread alone. Worship God and serve only him. Do not put God to the test.” One of the greatest tests and temptations of our faith deals with integrity.

Sometimes the temptation is to do the right thing but for the wrong reason. There’s a fictional story about Jesus and the disciples. It seems they were walking along a road one day when Jesus asked each of them to pick up a stone and carry it for him. John chose a large stone while Peter chose one that he could easily carry in his pocket. Jesus then led the disciples to the top of a mountain where he continued to teach them. He ignored the stones until, about mid day, tired and hungry, one of the disciples asked if there was anything to eat. Jesus told them to pick up the stones they had been carrying for him. Then he changed those stones into bread. Each disciple was allowed to eat the bread he held in his hand. Much to his chagrin, Peter’s portion of bread was barely a mouthful, so John shared some of his bread with Peter.

Later that same day, as they were headed down the mountain along the same stony path, Jesus told the disciples to pick up and carry another stone for him. This time Peter picked up the largest stone he could find. He had trouble carrying it with one hand, it was so big. Jesus led the disciples to a river. There he sat and taught them some more. Then Jesus did something strange, he told them to throw their stones into the water. They each did so, but nothing happens other than big splashes. The disciples were bewildered. Then Jesus turned to them and asked a simple question, “For whom did you carry the stone?”

Part of what we are about, as disciples on the journey of faith together, is carrying stones for Jesus. Sometimes those stones will be turned into bread to nourish and satisfy. Other times we will simply be called upon to be obedient and faithful and carry the stone because it is what God expects.

One of the questions of our faith and our faithfulness will always be: "For whom do you carry the stone?" Is it for us or is it for Jesus. It's important that we do the right thing. But it is equally important to do the right thing for the right reason and purpose.

Finally, I think the worst temptation of all is to forget. We're tempted to forget that Jesus faced everything we face but did not give in. We forget two key verses found in the letter to the Hebrews, specifically Hebrews 2:18, "Because Jesus himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." And Hebrews 4:15-16 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Those verses are a call to remember, not forget. We're called to remember that Jesus is on our side. He knows everything there is to know about us and still he loves us. He came to help us become like him. He came to help us be faithful and succeed in being faithful. In the midst of temptation, we're called to remember that. No matter what your particular temptation involves, we're called to remember that we can "approach the throne of grace with boldness, on our time of need." Why? Because Jesus "is able to help those who are being tested." Jesus helps us remember just as he remembered in the wilderness when he was tempted and was faithful.

So what is it that is tempting you right now? What temptation has your life and your faith in turmoil right now? Whatever it is bring it with you when you come to the Lord in prayer. Bring it with you and give it to him.

We are told, "Approach the throne of grace with boldness, in your time of need" because Jesus "Is able to help those who are being tested." And you need that help right now. Approach the throne of God, let go of that temptation, give it to Jesus. Feed upon the grace of his presence, the strength of that grace and the power of his forgiveness.