

“The Temptations and The Four Tops”
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Menifee United Church of Christ

Three ministers, all from the same town, from three different churches, go away for a retreat in a distant city. They stay in a hotel and one night they get together and they say, “Let’s tell each other our temptations.” The first minister says, “My temptation is probably the worst of all. I’m addicted to gambling. On Saturday, when I should be working on my sermon, I go to the casino and blow my paycheck on the craps table.” The second minister said, “Well, my temptation is worse than that. I am an alcoholic. On Saturday, when I should be working on my sermon, I’m dead drunk.” The third minister said, “Well, my temptation is probably worst of all. I hate to say this, but I am a terrible gossip. I hope you don’t mind if I excuse myself and go make a couple of phone calls back home.”

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. There are six Sundays in Lent and then the seventh Sunday is Easter Sunday. Lent, as you probably know, is a time for us to examine our lives. I think it was Socrates who said, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” During Lent, we examine our lives, but usually it has the connotation of being negative, we look at the negative things, the bad things, we’ve done. But I think we should also look at the good things we’ve done during Lent. The goodness we’ve done, the kindness we’ve done, the compassionate acts we’ve done, and rejoice over those. But Lent, traditionally, is the time when we look at the errors, the mistakes, the sins, we may have committed and repent of those. Lent is a good time to do that.

We all have probably committed mistakes, errors, sins that we need to repent of. So we do. We examine our lives. Maybe we have gambled to excess, drunk to excess, gossiped to excess and we resolve not to do that and repent of those mistakes, errors, sins, if you will. Sometimes we do things that aren’t quite that bad, we may have resolved to no longer be judgmental, if we’ve been judgmental in the past. Or we resolve not to be selfish, to be generous, during Lent and beyond.

Lent is also sort of a do-over for our New Year’s Resolutions. Maybe on January 1 we resolved to give up drinking, but then, on January 2, we downed a bottle of booze. Then we change our ways during Lent. It’s our do-over time. Maybe on January 1 we resolve not to gamble, but then, on January 2, we went to Vegas, put all our life’s savings on the craps table and lost. During Lent, we get to have a do-over and start again. That’s the thing about Lent. We can make mistakes, resolve not to make those mistakes any more, not to give in to those temptations, but then we do. But Lent comes back again, and we can resolve again not to do those things.

Jesus told us how to resist temptation. According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. He fasted for forty days and forty nights. Then the devil shows up, and the devil, knowing Jesus has got to be hungry, says, “Hey, Jesus, why don’t you turn those stones into bread?” That was the first Temptation, and this is the first Top: Jesus says, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Then, the devil takes Jesus up to the top of the Temple and says, “Jesus, throw yourself down, for it is written that God will send his angels to save you.” Jesus says, “It is written, ‘Do not put God to the test.’” That was the second Temptation and the second Top. In the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus up to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says, “All of these kingdoms can be yours, if you’ll just bow down and worship me.” Jesus says, “Get out of here, Satan! For it is written you should only worship God.”

So those were the Temptations and three Tops. But my message is entitled, “The Temptations and the Four Tops” because in the gospel of Luke, it says that after Jesus was tempted three times by the devil, the devil went away to wait for a more opportune time to tempt Jesus. But as far as I know, that never is written about in the gospels. But I wonder if the devil tempted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Jesus was praying so intently and intensely that he sweated blood, I wonder if the devil said to Jesus, “Jesus, ask God to take this cup from you,” and Jesus did. But then Jesus came up with the fourth Top. He said, “Not my will, but Thy will be done.” There you have the Temptations and the Four Tops. Can you tell I like Motown? There’s one more Motown song coming, so stay tuned.

Jesus showed us how to resist temptation, basically just say no. If we’re tempted by drink, just say no. If we’re tempted by gambling, just say no. If we’re tempted to gossip, just say no. If we’re tempted to be judgmental, just say no. If we’re tempted to be selfish, just say no. Now I know that some addictions are harder to overcome than using “Just say no.” Alcoholism and gambling are two strong addictions that some people need to get professional help for, they need to join a recovery group to overcome, they have to join a Twelve Step Program, they may even have to put themselves in rehab to overcome their temptations, to overcome their addictions. But the good thing about Lent, as I said, is that you can keep trying. There’s hope. There’s hope that you can overcome whatever temptation you have. There’s hope.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, according to Matthew. Some say that Jesus was tempted in the desert. I, personally, am tempted by the dessert!

Sweets are my kryptonite. Sweets are my addiction. Sweets are my temptation. Last year, during Lent, some of you may remember this, my daughter talked me into joining her in giving up sweets for Lent. I did that for six and a half weeks. Yikes! I would give up ice cream at night, but then I'd replace it with popcorn. So any weight loss I wanted never happened. This year I said to my daughter, "Let's give up snacks for Lent." That way at night I won't have popcorn or ice cream. Between meals I won't have a snack or a sweet. But I thought, if we just give up snacks - between meal goodies - I could still have a couple of Chuck's chocolate chip cookies after church, because that would be kind of like dessert, part of the meal. Or a couple of Velna's butterscotch brownies, with or without nuts. So I suggested to my daughter that we give up snacks. She came back with "Let's give up snacks and sweets." WHAT?!? Snacks and sweets for six and a half weeks? Oy!

Well, I've done it so far, for what, five days. I have withdrawal symptoms. I do crave sweets, but so far, so good. But I do need you all to help me out. Don't lead me into temptation. Make all the wonderful delicious desserts you want to make for after church, but don't say, "Oh, Pastor Bill, you've got to try this homemade whatever, you've got to have that!" No! Get thee behind me Satan! It is written, "One does not live by Chuck's chocolate chip cookies or Velna's butterscotch brownies alone, but only by the words that come from the mouth of God!" There you go. Help me out with this.

I have a friend who told me he gave up cigarettes years ago. He said: Remember the Great American Smoke Out? I do remember that. The American Cancer Society said give up cigarettes for just one day. I don't know if they do that anymore. ("They do.") They do? OK. He did that for a day. He said, "I can do that for a day." Then he did it for another day. And another day. And he gave up cigarettes, which was wonderful. He said, though, that he did sometimes fall off the wagon and, if he had a traumatic event in his life, then he went back to smoking cigarettes for a little while, but then he gave them up again. That happened a couple of times, but now he hasn't smoked for many years. Again, that's the nice thing about Lent. We can fall off the wagon, but then we can get back on the wagon. We can give up whatever it is that tempts us. Although Mark Twain said, "Giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world. I know because I've done it thousands of times." But Jesus said, "Go and sin no more." That's what we're to do, however often it takes to do that.

Maya Angelou made mistakes early in her life. The great author and poet said when she was in her earlier years, she was a sex worker. She didn't try to hide that fact later in life. She wrote about it, in fact. She said she wrote about it because too often adults act like they're perfect to young people. Then young people think "I don't think I can be perfect." She wanted young people to know that she wasn't perfect, but she repented, I guess you could say, and changed her ways. Maya Angelou says, "When you know better, you do better." She's a very spiritual woman. I've seen her on Oprah several times, and she told Oprah, "I'm a praying woman." After Maya Angelou gave up being a sex worker, she became a professional dancer and singer. She toured with "Porgy and Bess" in Europe. In the sixties, she worked with Dr. King for civil rights. In 1969 she wrote her autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," to much acclaim. She never got a bachelor's degree, but she became a full professor at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In 1993, President Clinton asked her to recite her poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," at his inauguration, which she did. My favorite poem of hers is "Still I Rise."

"You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies

You may tread me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise."

And my, oh my. Or Maya, oh Maya, did she rise! And she is an example for all of us. She did rise. We can rise.

Some people get hung up, though, on mistakes they've made, errors they've made, the sins they've committed. They figure they can't do anything good with their life. They figure their mistake was too big to ever overcome. Bigger than Maya Angelou's? Bigger than Moses', who killed a man? Bigger than the apostle Paul, who, when he was Saul, stood by and watched Stephen murdered. No. We can all overcome whatever mistakes, errors, or sins we've done and lead the life that God wants us to lead, that God created us to lead. Because Lent tells us we are forgiven when we repent and resolve to do better. We are forgiven.

The Supremes had a hit song a few years ago that speaks to our topic. It can help us, I think, to overcome temptation. The Supremes sang, "Stop, in the name of love." I think, if we're ever tempted to make a mistake, commit an error, commit a sin, we need to stop in the name of love. STOP is an acronym. I got this from Deepak Chopra, but I've changed it a little bit. S stands for: Stay inside yourself. T: Take a breath. O: Open your heart to love. P: Proceed with love. STOP in the name of love. If we'll do that when we're tempted to commit an error, commit a sin, make a mistake, then I think we can overcome it. We just have to: Stay inside ourselves. Take a breath. Open our heart to love. And: Proceed with love. If somebody is cut off in traffic, and is tempted to give a one finger salute to whoever cut them off, if they'll remember STOP in the name of love, then they'll overcome that temptation.

What about you? Are you ever tempted to commit an error, make a mistake, or commit a sin? Do you think that STOP in the name of love might help you? I think that if all the world were to do that, this would be a much better place. Imagine if world leaders who are tempted to go to war with another country, imagine if they said: STOP in the name of love. Stay inside yourself. Take a breath. Open your heart to love. Proceed with love. This would be a wonderful world. And if everybody in the world did that, I think one day we would have peace on earth, goodwill toward all.

Let us pray:
God of love,
Help us to avoid temptation.
Help us to resist temptation.
And help us to STOP in the name of love.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes,
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*