

The Science of Temptation

First Sunday of Lent, March 1, 2020

The theme of our readings on this 1st Sunday of Lent is “temptation” — what it is, how it works, and how best to respond to it when it arises. Today's readings take us on a journey that starts before history began, in the mysterious world of Eden. Our Genesis reading starts a bit late in the story, though. So, we have to remember that *just a few moments ago* in the garden... Adam & Eve were happy, “naked”, and “not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). The only “law” they knew & followed was “Natural Law.” The law that, by grace, we are all born with. It is innate. It is in the heart, not written down anywhere. In the beginning of human life, it is the values of Natural Law that govern our reasoning & choices & actions. And so, in the very beginning, we are **all** “naked, and not ashamed.”

◆ God gives them the commandment to not eat from *“the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”* to keep them in the grace of Natural Law, although God knows that this will not be possible. But, down the road, the commandment will help them understand what happened & why. ◆ Then comes the famous dialogue with the serpent. ◆ Then, they eat the forbidden fruit. ◆ And, then, just a few moments later – *“Oh No! God is coming!”* – and they're fearfully scrambling to cover up their private parts. ◆ And, then, God asks them a very interesting question: *“Who **told** you that you were naked?”* Again, God already knows the answer. He asks the question to help them understand why they are suddenly full of shame & fear, and blaming whoever they can.

The story makes it very clear that their **shame** was actually a **symptom** of a larger, underlying problem. Their symptom (of shame) revealed that they were now being inwardly dominated by a certain false, “unnatural” kind of **knowledge** about what good & evil are. A knowledge that was harshly *pointing out & portraying* their nakedness as **“evil”** — seeing it as an outward sign of their **unworthiness** to be in the garden, of their no longer **“belonging”** there.

The **inferiority** of shame is one symptom of such false knowledge, but not the only one. The “flipside” of shame is the **superiority** of arrogance, the sense of being the-most-worthy-one-of-all; not just good, but “the best”; the most *“entitled”* to belong. Shame **de-flates** and punishes the self. Arrogance **in-flates** and blames & punishes others *“from on high.”* It's the *shame* of Adam & Eve that the story highlights; their *arrogance* is only implied. But shame & arrogance are two sides of the same coin. Both are symptoms of a mind afflicted with a false, deceptive knowledge of what good & evil are.

So what exactly **is** this “false knowledge” that afflicts the mind and gives rise to the destructive forces of shame & arrogance? We might call it the **“conventional”** knowledge of good & evil.

The knowledge of man-made '**customs**' about what is good & what is evil. It's a knowledge we're not born with — it is not "innate", like Natural Law is. It's a knowledge that comes from the "outside." It's the knowledge of how we are **seen in the eyes of others** and, therein, how we come to see ourselves. On the one hand, it is the knowledge of what others see as "*seemly*," "*acceptable*" & "*respectable*" about us (*which comes to define what is "good."*) On the other hand, it is the knowledge of what others see as "*un-seemly*," "*un-acceptable*," or "**taboo**" about us (which comes to define what is "**evil.**")

In the more mysterious language of the story, the "Serpent" is the **Master Teacher** of this conventional knowledge. He sells it as the "secret knowledge" which only "gods" possess. And promises his students that if they just "take it in" and make it their own... their hearts & minds & deeds will become as wise & powerful & glorious as the gods'... Once they possess this "secret knowledge".... **THEY** will be the ones that make the conventions which other (*mere mortals*) have to live by. **THEY** will be the ones that decide who lives & who dies — who enjoys an easy, pleasant life — and who suffers a hard & painful one — who gets blamed & who gets praised. **THEY** will rule nature, instead of **IT** ruling them. And he cautions them — that if "God" is telling them anything different — it's simply because God wants to keep this "secret knowledge" all to himself — so that he will remain their *Master*, and they will remain his *Slaves*. And when they're clearly thinking of biting at the hook, he comes in for the close: "*Why would you want to remain Slaves, when you could become Masters instead? It's a 'no-brainer'.... So go ahead: take & eat...*"

Jesus speaks a great deal about this conventional knowledge of good & evil — in his critiques of the religious leaders who considered him shameful — *for healing on the Sabbath; for keeping company with 'sinners;'* *for allowing his disciples to eat without washing their hands, and so on.* Jesus quotes Isaiah, and tells them they are the false teachers described in prophecy — who teach only **human customs**, but call them **divine commandments**, and thus, form others in a faith as false as their own — a faith of "*honouring God with their lips, while their hearts are far from him.*" They are blind, he says, but imagine they can see more clearly than everyone else, and demand to be strictly obeyed, *or else...*

The key point, then, in the story of Eden is that Adam & Eve's "**debilitation**" by the demeaning powers of shame & the fear of shame — and their supposed "**rehabilitation**" by the glorifying power of arrogance — are actually symptoms of an even more insidious, underlying problem. Their harmful shame & arrogance only arise "*after the fact*" — after their minds have fallen into, and been overtaken by, the conventional "*knowledge of good & evil.*" It's only then that they begin to believe that *nature* — and the *Creator* of nature — *may not be that good after all.* Because, at that point, they have a very different understanding of what "good" actually is.

This is the Original Temptation — the original "trial" or "test" — of faith in the goodness of God. And, perhaps it is even the model, the template, of **all** temptations – including the temptations of Jesus. Consider today's gospel reading for yourself, and see what you think.

What we learn from the Eden story is that temptation is **a sudden encounter** that evokes shame (inferiority) in us, and offers us arrogance (superiority) to make that shame "go away." So when you find yourself being tempted in some way — **stop & notice:** "Am I... feeling ashamed? ... feeling arrogant? ... Does it seem like my only options are **either** -- to punish my self – **or** to blame (or take advantage of) someone else?" Just identifying what's happening inside of you will relieve the tension of temptation, and help you to think more clearly about the situation, whatever it is.

We also learn from the story that the shame & arrogance evoked in temptation are **fueled** by a subtle, false (and often seductive) understanding of what is "good" and what is "evil." So when you find yourself being tempted in some way — **stop & notice:** "What feels like *"the good"* to me right now? Is it something that will actually keep me (and keep others) whole & healthy? Is it something that promises to increase my power & fame & worth in the eyes of others and in my own eyes?" Just reflecting on such questions helps us identify what **kind** of knowledge of good & evil is at play in us.

When, in ways like these, we become more clear about what's actually going on inside of us, the true nature of temptation becomes clear: it's an *encountering*, a *facing* – **of our own desire** – to "*trade*" a true understanding of good & evil (which keeps us whole & healthy) for a false one (which *promises* us the world, but *actually* just ties us up on the "teeter-totter" of shame & arrogance, with all the harmful thoughts, words and deeds they generate.) When we can identify this desire of ours, it takes the steam out of it. It puts us in a position to make a well informed, uncoerced, free choice. And when we choose wisely, we get something truly **good** out of our temptations. We grow.

If all this is too much to remember... the short form is "*Get thee behind me Satan!*"

But I hope we'll all invest time in *recognizing; praying about; and reflecting on* the temptations we all face in our daily lives. Our readings this Lent will give us many good opportunities to do so.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, may we all have... a truly **good**... Lent. Amen.