

Luke 11:4b  
July 20, 2008

South Plains  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### God and Temptation

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

Fellowship is always close for a covered dish supper in country churches. Nobody gets too far from the food. The women supervise everything, arranging tables according to an ancient logic that stacks paper plates at the starting line, followed by meat and vegetables. Next, comes the colorful array of salads, which at old-fashioned suppers meant ringing the changes on Jell-O mixed with fruit, Coolwhip and shredded carrots. Finally, the women display their biscuits, rolls and cornbread. Sweet tea and coffee wait where refills won't interfere with the serving line. But, the jewel in this spread is the dessert table, packed with several varieties of apple pie, brownies, a sheet cake sprinkled with confectionery sugar, layered cakes dripping with icing and my personal favorite, shoofly pie, which consists of a dense mixture of egg, molasses, brown sugar and spice under a paper-thin crust of caramelized sugar.

The room is hot with temptation. Not only do the sights and smells tempt us to eat more than we should, the cooks will also be tempted to pride by flattering lies; some child will be tempted to return for seconds before all have been served – petty thievery of the worst sort;

and covetous glances will evaluate each dish with an eye toward the next gathering. On such an occasion, it is rank hypocrisy to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

When we think of temptation, what often comes to mind are sins of the flesh: eating, drinking and sex. In our over-indulgent culture, we certainly need to face up to these sins. Americans are threatened by an epidemic of obesity. Alcoholism and drug abuse abound. And, we are obsessed with sexuality, whether other people's or our own.

It might be healthy for our spirits to recover an older view that added two other categories: the world and the devil to the flesh. The devil is a catch-all category for those temptations that seem to come out of no where, assaulting us when we least expect them, disguising sin as natural ambition to take care of our family or to succeed in our job or to do our patriotic duty. The world and the flesh can also be deceptive but they are often blatant seductions to beat other people or to satisfy lust. Because we live in the real world, we pray that God will protect us from the evil that comes from following all temptations.

But, the way the Lord's Prayer is worded in Matthew's Gospel and in the church raises a serious question: How is the God and Father of Jesus involved in leading us into temptation? God does not try to lure us into sin the way a bad friend might tease us to do something wrong. God is, however, implicated in the

occasions for sinning that we face every day because God has created us to experience freedom. We live in a world where crazy things happen, where danger comes our way; and where sin, as irrational as it is, has been permitted by the Creator. The world is a tempting place.

The Lord's Prayer reminds us that we are vulnerable. We are apt to sin. Even if we have led a good Christian life for years, we are open to temptation. When a celebrity falls from grace, we chalk it up to their fame, and thank God we're neither rich nor famous. That prayer of thanks can be false pride, because nothing in the gospel promises us that we will avoid sinning, only that God will always extend protection and grace.

More recent translations of the prayer read, "Do not bring us to the time of trial." The word for temptation can also mean "test" or "trial." This helps us understand what God is about when we creatures, who are free to sin, are placed in an environment that tempts us to commit sin. Part of our freedom is the gift of growing, learning and maturing. This process of growth requires a certain amount of resistance. I have not seen the movie "Wall-ee," but I'm told it envisions a world far in the future when human beings no longer have to work. As a result, human bodies have atrophied until we cannot walk. We can only push buttons that activate robots to work for us. In the absence of any work to test and try our muscles, we degenerate. This would not be progress or maturity because human beings need the stress of resistance to

keep muscle and bone healthy. In the same way, we need moral trials to keep spirit and soul healthy.

In the Lord's Prayer we ask that God will not allow us to be tested beyond the strength available to us in Christ Jesus. The test would be neither real nor ultimately helpful unless it tested us close to our limits. So, God pushes us toward the limits of morality. The Olympic trials are not only designed to choose the best competitors to represent the United States. We hope these trials will also stretch and develop our athletes beyond their previous personal best. Athletes welcome the trials because they give them one more opportunity to better their times, to increase their distances, and to rise to new heights.

We should not seek out moral trials, as though it were good for us to flirt with sinning. Life will present plenty of opportunity to see whether or not we will grow spiritually. But, we should recognize the trials when they come and seek God's grace to meet each test successfully.

When we pray "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," we are confessing our need for God's help. We are also confessing our belief in evil. An alternate translation says, "Deliver us from the evil one." I happen to believe that evil often takes a very personal form. Whether or not we believe in a personal devil, I think there is ample evidence that evil is sometimes personified in the actions and motives of particular

individuals. The great villains of history provide us with easy examples: Hitler, Idi Amin, and the more cruel Roman Emperors. More relevant to our lives are the occasions when we encounter an every day villain: The bureaucrat who puts keeping the rules above sustaining human life. Or, the cranky clerk whose unconfessed mistake costs us time and money. Of course, there are those times when we ourselves fall so far short of the golden rule that we become devilish toward the people around us.

Thus, the prayer acknowledges the presence of evil and temptation, confesses our vulnerability to the lure of evil, and reminds us that evil is not just an abstract, lifeless force in the world. Evil can infect real people, even you and me. That's why it can be called "sinfulness" in the Christian vocabulary. We make a tragic mistake, a dangerous miscalculation when we reduce evil and sin to nothing more than a lack of education or a disadvantaged social environment or bad genetic makeup. Those factors are important too. But, sometimes people choose to do evil things.

The overwhelming reality of this petition is a warning that we cannot and should not challenge evil on our own. To fight sin with only will power and good habits, supported by good friends, is like playing roulette. Sometimes we will win; but eventually, when it counts, sin will win the battle unless we accept the Lord's strength on our behalf.

This can be humbling, even humiliating to admit that for all our faith and good habits, we need grace every day. We cannot fight evil alone. Thus, we call upon God.

Pope Benedict paraphrases this portion of the Lord's Prayer in a way that I find helpful:

We are saying to God: "I know that I need trials so that my nature can be purified. When you decide to send me these trials, when you give evil some room to maneuver, as you did with Job, then please remember that my strength goes only so far. Don't overestimate my capacity. Don't set too wide the boundaries within which I may be tempted, and be close to me with your protecting hand when it becomes too much for me."

*(Jesus of Nazareth, p. 163)*

In our modern, scientific world that is so filled with different spirits, we are tempted to forget the presence of the God and Father of Jesus. We suppose that just one bite of the apple in the garden can't possibly hurt us that much. And, we imagine that whatever harm might come from our sin, we can overcome it with our technology and affluence. Thus, we go out to fight evil alone.

And, that's why we pray every Sunday, "Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil."