

UNDERSTANDING THE SHADOW WITHIN

Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

Based on Matthew 4:1-11
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A couple of summers ago, I was driving up Rt. 11 in Adams one day and spotted a homemade poster tacked to a telephone pole that read, "*Yard Sale - Handyman's special.*" I made a quick left hand turn and followed signs to a front lawn filled with all kinds of tools and equipment. As I strolled about the lawn, I thought to myself, "Oh, I could use that... and I could use that!... and I could use that!" I felt tempted to buy another shovel, a second wheelbarrow, a shop vacuum, and a grease gun. While I was looking over some miscellaneous plumbing supplies thrown into three large plastic buckets, the owner of the house, said to me, "*You can have all 3 buckets of plumbing supplies for only \$20 - the stuff is worth \$100!*" I think he was probably right.

I felt my hand go for my wallet . But then I thought to myself, "*Well, how much of this plumbing stuff will I ACTUALLY use?*" I didn't know. There were a lot of oddball pieces of plumbing in those buckets that I probably would NEVER use. Suddenly, it occurred to me that I might not use even \$20 of these materials, and that it might very well be a better bargain to buy new materials exactly as I needed them. I took my hand off my wallet and walked away, but it had been a close call. I almost bought a bunch of stuff that I would never use, all under the premise of taking advantage of a good bargain.

Temptation is something that pulls at all of us. We may be tempted to do something a little wasteful or rebellious like eating an oversized ice cream cone or buying a bunch of things at a yard sale that in the end we probably will never use. Or we may be tempted to do something much more serious and destructive like having an extra marital affair with an alluring co-worker who is definitely giving "go-ahead signals." Temptations seduce us into courses of action which usually go against our better judgment, and eventually lead us down into a dead-end road of destruction.

The scriptures this morning show us that Jesus also felt the lure and the power of temptation. The shadowy pull of temptation is sometimes personified in the scriptures as the devil. Whether you call it the devil, or the lure of temptation, or the power of darkness, it is all the same power working within us.

Jesus had been out in the wilderness for 40 days fasting and praying. So Jesus was in a weakened state physically when the devil presented him with three great temptations. This is always the time when temptations come to us and seduce us - when we are weak, or afraid, or confused, or fragile, or lonely, or insecure, or needy for attention.

All these weaknesses and fears within us make up a part of our self that we sometimes refer to as "our shadow." Everyone has a shadow within them; no one is exempt, no matter how good one may be. Our shadow within is made up of our insecurities, our envy, our jealousy, our ambition, our desires for pleasure or power or comfort, our selfishness, our immaturities, our emotional wounds, and our neediness. All these shadowy forces within push us to make terrible decisions, be judgmental, lash out in anger, be self-absorbed, be anxious about everything, be suspicious of everyone, or justify self-serving behaviors. Every human being, no matter who they are, has some kind of shadow within that gets hooked and preyed upon by the seductive power of temptation.

So, the devil, who works best in the shadows, came to Jesus when he was starving, and said, *"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."* What the devil is doing here is hunting for Jesus' shadow - his weakness, his place of neediness, his secret desires and insecurities. The devil was trying to locate what buttons he could push in Jesus that would set him off and derail him.

This first temptation of turning stone into bread is the temptation of the "quick fix," the temptation of instant gratification. Jesus was hungry. Why should he be uncomfortable for even a minute? Why should he wait? Isn't he somebody special? Isn't he the Messiah? Isn't he ENTITLED to all the bread he wants, and to have it immediately? You can see how temptation activates our very worst thoughts and tendencies.

Temptations always promise to give us quick relief or pleasure. The pursuit of the "quick fix" is fueled in us by the childish hope that we can somehow just bypass the real limits of life. How do you go after the quick fix? When you are angry or in a bad mood, do you tend to blame others or have a sharp tongue with them, because that momentarily makes you feel better? Do you overcharge your credit card and thereby imperil the security of your family because you just want to enjoy things that you really can't afford? Do you sometimes feel tempted to lie or do drugs, rather than face a hard, uncomfortable truth?

And where do these quick fixes get us? If we focus on the immediate desire of gratifying ourselves or making ourselves comfortable, what do we start losing sight of? If Jesus turned the rocks into bread, where would that shortcut get him? Closer to happiness? Closer to God? No. It's all an illusion, a distraction from life's deeper joys and purposes.

So Jesus says to the devil, *"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"* Quick fixes may give temporary contentment, but they do not feed our souls. Our souls don't need more possessions or stones turned into bread; they need the love, the spirit, and the kingdom of God.

In the second temptation, the devil takes Jesus up on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, and says to him, *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for*

it is written, 'God will command his angels concerning you, and ... will bear you up.' See how the devil cleverly shifts gears here. With the first temptation, Jesus brushed off the devil by saying that God is the true bread that satisfies. The devil sees this, and figures, *"Well, if Jesus' relationship with God is his strength, then I'll undermine that."*

So the devil challenges Jesus to test and distrust God. *"If you are the Son of God, then jump off this tower and see if God will rescue you."* This is the temptation of doubt. Do we really trust God? Do we really believe God loves us even though we are very ordinary and imperfect? Are we going to commit to our deepest intuitions that God is our rock and our light, or are we going to decide that we are just on our own, that God isn't there or is just irrelevant, and we would fare better by just pursuing our own desires and designs? We must decide what our deepest foundation and values are. We must, like Jesus, not listen too carefully to the anxious voice of our shadow. So Jesus rejects the devil's offer, replying, *"It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

In the third temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and then says, *"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."* Here the devil is infiltrating one of Jesus' most cherished dreams. The devil knows that what Jesus cares about most is transforming the world. What better way to accomplish his mission than to become king of all the kingdoms the world? Think of all that he could accomplish with all that power and fame that he could get from the devil – think of how many people would then listen to Jesus and take him seriously! The devil was trying to hook Jesus' shadow by making him question what he'd be able to accomplish as a mere itinerant preacher who got crucified.

Life is so big, and sometimes we feel so little, so ineffectual, so put down, so out of control. All of us worry that we might be living insignificant lives that will soon be forgotten. So, we are tempted to go after a little more power, a little more success, a little more control. We can't stop being a workaholic because we want to be able to say to ourselves and to others that we accomplished a lot. Or we take a job that pays well but compromises our values. Or we say others are wrong so that we will appear right. We boast about our accomplishments or about our children, hoping that that will make us feel more secure.

Have you ever done these things? This temptation to be the top dog, to have people look up to us, preys upon our deepest places of insecurity: our fear of being overlooked, our need to be somebody, our desire to hear the approval and applause of others. And every time we try to heal our own insignificance by lording it over others or puffing ourselves up, we are bowing down and worshipping the devil. This is when our shadow takes control of us, and we seek earthly powers that can never heal. Only God's power of love can fill our emptiness and our need to be valued. So Jesus says to the devil, *"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"*

The devil ultimately failed to tempt Jesus, not because the devil wasn't clever, but because Jesus had deep self-understanding and self-acceptance that dismantled his shadow. Jesus knew all about his shadow side, what hooked it, how it acted and reacted, and how to comfort it and calm it so that it was not susceptible to temptation. Jesus submitted his shadow to God in every moment. Our shadow side has strength only when we are

unconscious and are blind to its pressures. And when the shadow becomes weak, temptation has no real power over us.

To live as a disciple of Christ, then, means that we, like Jesus, have deep self-understanding, and we know our own shadow very well – we know our weaknesses and immaturities, our fears and insecurities, and we know what hooks our shadow and draws out its destructive side. As disciples of Christ, we never let our shadow go unexamined. Rather, we humbly understand it, we tenderly work with it, we share it with God in prayer. We don't let our shadow assert itself freely, because it is like a child that is out of control. Instead, we let God be our guide, because we know very clearly that there is a terrible cost to us and others when we give way to our shadow and follow the lure of temptation.

Temptations lose their appeal when we know that they can never really deliver on the promises they make. Extra marital affairs are not the solutions to our loneliness that we thought – they eventually are discovered and destroy our marriages and families and cause enormous complications for years come. Or participating in malicious gossip in our workplaces doesn't make us feel good for long – we soon have to work doubly hard because there is now so little trust between us and our co-workers. Our temptations don't seem so tempting when we take a good look at the consequences of acting on them!

A middle school in Oregon faced a unique problem in the girl's bathrooms. When the girls would put on their lipstick, they would press their lips to the mirrors leaving dozens of little lip prints. Finally the principal decided something had to be done. She called a large group of girls to the bathroom and met them there with the custodian. She explained lip prints caused a major problem for the custodian, who had to clean the mirrors every day. To demonstrate how difficult it was, she asked the custodian to clean one of the mirrors in front of the girls. He took out a long-handled toilet brush, dipped it into one of the toilets, and then scrubbed the mirror. Ever since that demonstration, the lip prints on the mirrors disappeared. Nobody, it seems, felt like kissing the mirrors again!

This is what happens when we look deeply into any temptation – we see the pain that will be caused to our loved ones, we see the damage that will be done to our bodies or to our futures. We see the stress and the tension that will be created. Our temptations begin to feel as distasteful as kissing a mirror just washed by a toilet brush.

The scriptures this morning show how Jesus used his temptations as opportunities to be closer to God. We can do the same. Each time Jesus was tempted and saw his shadow being hooked, he turned to God. Henri Nouwen once said, *"I cannot continuously say no to this or no to that, unless there is something ten times more attractive to choose. Saying no to my lust, my greed, my needs, and the world's powers takes an enormous amount of energy. The only hope is to find something so obviously real and attractive that I can devote all my energies to saying yes.... One such thing I can say yes to is when I come in touch with the fact that I am loved. Once I have found that in my total brokenness I am still loved, I become free from the compulsion of doing successful things."* This "something" that is ten times more attractive than our temptations is the beauty and love of God's kingdom. Pursue that beauty – it is embedded in every experience.

When you feel vulnerable or tempted, when you feel your shadow being hooked and activated, be careful. Don't act on any desire that emerges from your shadow. Instead, turn to God and explain how you feel tempted, and believe that God has something better for you, a bigger perspective and a greater joy. Tell God, *"I am hurting. I am lonely. I'm feeling empty. I feel like having an affair. I feel like going to the bar. I'm tired of never having enough money or time. I'm afraid my life isn't amounting to much. I'm afraid I'm going to lash out and hurt somebody."* Let God comfort you, and make you secure. Let God raise you up, and heal your shadow, and grant you all that you need.

I once knew an art teacher who had a poster in her room that said something like this: *"Today you have been given a brand new day to live. You can choose to waste it, being angry and inconsiderate, or you can choose to do something good. The choice is yours, so choose well."* Like Jesus, we must choose well, because temptations lurk around every corner, and our shadow within is always listening and susceptible.

We cannot afford to be naïve. As disciples of Jesus, we must understand that we all have a shadow side that is afraid and reactive and worried and insecure, like a wounded animal. And because our shadow is easily hooked by temptations to do things that go against our better judgment, we must be very clear about what is good and what is not, what is wise and what is foolish, what is selfish and what is loving, what puffs up our egos and what pleases God. We must be very clear about what is real and eternal and good. And we've got to have the guts to say, *'This is the right way, this is what is truly important, this is what God wants me to do.'* And always like Jesus, we must turn to God and say, *"Lord, I just need to walk with you."* Then, our shadow is healed, and our temptations gently fall away.

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