

1

A family was getting ready for a friend's birthday party by helping prepare the cupcakes. A wife told her husband, "I've finished frosting the cupcakes. I've told the kids not to eat them before the party. Keep them out of the kitchen while I get dressed for the party."

The husband wandered out of the kitchen for just a few minutes to answer the phone, and when he returned, he saw tiny fingerprint smudges of chocolate frosting on the plate. When he looked at his child's fingers, he asked, "How did you get frosting on your fingers?"

"I don't know," came the reply. When the father pointed to the impressions in the cupcakes and said, "I think those match your fingers," his child replied, "I couldn't help it. They were tempting, and the cupcakes looked so lonely."

Temptation. It's so enticing. So attractive. So...tempting. I imagine every one of us has experienced temptations, and we're not alone, for even Jesus experienced temptation.

In Matthew's telling of the event, Jesus had just stepped out of the waters of baptism, an event that

reaffirmed God's loving embrace of him. From the sudden transition from the story of his baptism to the temptation in the wilderness, it appears that Jesus hadn't even had time for his hair to dry. I imagine his robe was still dripping with the water from the river when the Spirit led him into the wilderness.

After fasting for forty days and nights in the desert Jesus was famished, and he faced his first temptation: an encounter with an offer for food. A chance to make bread. We may wonder, *after a time of fasting, what's so bad about eating some bread to regain his strength to begin his ministry?* The offer came from one described as *diablos*, a Greek word meaning "the one who separates" or "the one who makes false statements," the "seducer," "the tempter."

The Tempter offered easy power by making attractive but false statements. This was more than just an offer to make bread, for the suggestion wasn't to use wheat for bread making. This temptation offered the easy path to fame and glory by suggesting that Jesus turn *stones* into bread.

2

Mennonite author Donald Kraybill offers a helpful interpretation of these temptations in his book *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Rather than focusing on a literal satanic figure as the point of the story, and rather than dismissing the story as purely fantasy, Kraybill's interpretation offers us a wider picture into this story of temptation.

The temptation was not that Jesus should feed himself, but that Jesus could take an easy way to feed the large number of hungry people he would soon encounter. If he could change rocks into bread, he could become popular with the crowd and control the economic system. Kraybill suggested, however, that Jesus' kingdom went against the normal power structures of the day by turning things upside down. Rather than taking control of the economic systems and creating easy bread, when Jesus faced a hungry crowd later in his ministry, he asked who people in the crowd who had bread to share.

His encounter with the Tempter first offered easy bread and economic power. It's tempting, don't you think?

After the first temptation, the Tempter took Jesus to the top of the temple and suggested that he should jump, reassuring him that God's angels would protect him. Kraybill suggested that this was a temptation to get all the religious authorities on his side:

A miraculous, divine blessing near the sacred temple would erase any doubts about Jesus' messianic authority. The masses would quickly follow if the scribes and wise men embraced the newcomer. Parachuting into the temple court would make Jesus instant Messiah.<sup>1</sup>

I can almost hear the echo of the Tempter's words: "Hey Jesus. You know you have a hard road ahead. Let's make it a lot simpler. Create a show here at the temple and you won't have to confront the religious leaders. You won't have to hang out with all those poor and disease-filled people. And you can forget about that cross and suffering. Get on the side of these religious leaders and take the easy path."

Instant religious success. It's tempting.

When Jesus didn't go along with this second temptation, the Tempter offered a third one: on the

top of the mountain, Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the world and offered ultimate control if only he would worship the Tempter. Jesus faced the temptation of ultimate political power.

Just imagine how tempting the words might have been:

“Hey, Jesus, if you follow me, I can make you king of kings. All nations will bow before you. If anyone steps out of line, you will have the greatest military power in the world to carry out your orders.”

Ultimate political control. It’s tempting, but in Jesus’ upside-down kingdom, he replaced “force with suffering and violence with love.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s often those things that sound too good to be true that are often the most tempting, as author William Willimon discovered when he was

leading a Sunday School class that was studying [this story of] the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. After careful study and explanation of each of the three temptations, Dr. Willimon asked, “How are we tempted today?” A young salesman was the first to speak. “Temptation is when your boss calls you in, as mine did yesterday, and says, ‘I’m going to give you a

real opportunity. I’m going to give you a bigger sales territory. We believe that you are going places, young man.’

“But I don’t want a bigger sales territory,” the young salesman told his boss. “I’m already away from home four nights a week. It wouldn’t be fair to my wife and daughter.”

“Look,” his boss replied, “we’re asking you to do this *for* your wife and daughter. Don’t you want to be a good father? It takes money to support a family these days. Sure, your little girl doesn’t take much money now, but think of the future. Think of her future. I’m only asking you to do this for them,” the boss said.

The young man told the class, “Now, *that’s* temptation.”<sup>3</sup>

At this point I thought it might be interesting for each of us to call out the temptations that we have faced, but since temptation is such a personal struggle that we each encounter, I decided that was not a good idea.

Instead, on this weekend when we celebrate the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. who faced the evils of racism, I’m reminded that many of us face the temptation to ignore the problems of racism. We’re tempted to think the issue doesn’t affect us,

④

or that we can't do anything about it, or that others can deal with the problem. We're tempted to isolate ourselves in our routines and comfort and ignore the injustice that many African Americans still face today. We may even feel tempted to forget about the history of slavery in our nation, forgetting that 400 years ago the first slaves were traded in Virginia at Comfort Point, a peninsula that extends into Chesapeake Bay. The Jamestown settlers had built a fort there in 1609, and it's in this area in 1619 that some historians suggest the first slaves were traded.<sup>4</sup>

It's tempting for some to suggest that 400 years was so long ago that what happened then doesn't

make much difference now, but the pains of slavery and racism do continue to echo in our nation today.

It's tempting to wander in the wilderness and ignore the reality of racism, but Jesus invites us to turn the world upside down by creating bridges of compassion, to listen to the stories of our brothers and sisters who have endured a difficult history. We may be tempted to divide ourselves into different groups or use our power to create fear. Or we can continue to make our nation great, a place of welcome for the diversity our nation was founded upon. We may feel tempted to build walls that divide us one from another, but Jesus invites us to turn the world upside down by reaching out to our sisters and brothers of many colors.

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, 1978, 2011, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Kraybill, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> William Willimon, *What's Right with the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), as adapted by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).

<sup>4</sup> Rupa Shenoy, "Pirates brought enslaved Africans to Virginia's shores. Where, exactly, is debatable," [www.kosu.org/post/pirates-brought-enslaved-africans-virginia-s-shores-where-exactly-debatable](http://www.kosu.org/post/pirates-brought-enslaved-africans-virginia-s-shores-where-exactly-debatable)