

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, February 10, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“NO DEAL”

Matthew 4:1-11

Temptation is something we all face. Sometimes it comes to us in the area of personal finances, especially in this day of e-bay and amazon.com and easy credit cards. Or in the area of eating. I read about a man who was suing a hospital. A doctor had performed staple surgery on his stomach to help him lose weight. Two days after the surgery he raided a hospital refrigerator and stuffed himself with everything in it. This tore open the staples and forced more surgery. The man sued the hospital for pain and suffering, claiming the fridge was too close to his room and made the temptation too great.

Often we chuckle about sexual temptation. In a Born Loser cartoon, Brutus says to his wife, “May I ask you a question, Gladys?” “Of course,” she says. He asks, “Is your love for me beyond temptation? If Paul Newman was trying to woo you away, would you still love me?” Gladys replies, “Of course dear! And I would miss you very much, too!” We chuckle, but giving in to sexual temptation has devastating consequences. We need to resist it with all our strength reinforced by the strength of the living Christ, which we receive here in worship.

We begin Lent by looking at Jesus’ temptations. At his baptism Jesus heard God say, “You are my beloved Son.” Immediately the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. It seems strange, but it was necessary in order to reinforce Jesus’ understanding of Sonship.

The devil first said to him, “Son of God, turn these stones into bread.” Jesus was hungry and could have provided bread for himself. And imagine how popular he would have been if he had provided free bread for all. Well, twice Jesus did multiply loaves and fishes and feed a multitude, but he also rebuked those people who came to him afterwards seeking more bread. The Son of God knew he had come to do more than satisfy people’s physical hunger. He said to the devil, “It is written, “Man shall not live by Bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

Again the devil tempted him, “If you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from the temple. God’s angels will protect you.” Now if we deliberately throw ourselves from the heights, we know what will happen. Jesus knew he must enter fully and deeply into human experience in order to save us. He knew he could not ask God for special protection or exemption from

physical laws. He resisted the devil by saying, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

Finally, the devil tempted him by saying, “I will give you all the Kingdoms of this world, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus knew that God’s Son was not to grasp after kingdoms and thrones, but give up all rights and claims to power. He knew that he must serve and worship only one Master and that his earthly throne would be a Cross. He said, “Be gone Satan! It is written ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” In response to every temptation Jesus said to the devil, “No deal.”

Now you and I are not God’s Son. We are sons and daughters of God through receiving and believing in the Son of God who died and rose again for us. We will not be tempted by the devil in the wilderness as Jesus was for forty days. But there are two particular temptations the devil whispers in the ear of Christ’s people. And giving in to them distorts what it means to be a redeemed child of God and diminishes our effectiveness as Christ’s witnesses and servants. As these temptations come we must resist them by relying on God’s word and the abiding presence of our Lord. In the strength of Christ we must say to the devil, “No deal.”

The first temptation the devil whispers in our ear is that bread is enough.

Jesus said, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” But the devil tempts us to believe that money and the things money can buy can fulfill us. It comes to us from every bill-board, every television station. “Bread” is all you need for abundant living. But the pursuit of “bread” is consuming us. We never seem to have enough and we are never satisfied. I can see the day coming when malls will be open 24/7, 365 days a year. Think what that will do to the environment, let alone to peoples’ souls. And the more bread we have the less we think we need God and the word of God. Ask yourself, “Why in this community, as the standard of living has gone up markedly for two generations, has the level of church attendance and involvement decreased? Why does the church struggle to meet its local and outreach commitments in the midst of such abundance?” Surely it’s because many people who once professed faith in Christ have fallen for the devil’s lie that “bread is enough.” “Bread” takes over our lives to such an extent that there’s no room for God and his word.

Friends, whatever the world without God does, we are different. We must say “No” when we are tempted to believe that our lives can be fulfilled and secured by bread alone. We know that we are not only physical beings, but spiritual beings who need beauty, truth, and love. We need mercy and light and the hope of eternity. We need God’s word in our hearts. Above all, we need the best and final word that proceeded from the mouth of God, the word made flesh, Jesus Christ. We need Christ in our hearts, who alone satisfies our spiritual

hunger and quenches our spiritual thirst.

This has implications for ourselves and also for the mission of the church. Now God is all for meeting peoples' physical needs. After all, he has made a bountiful world with enough for everyone's need, if not everyone's greed. Certainly the church must be mobilized to feed the hungry, open the eyes of the blind, and give water to the thirsty. And all that is good, but it's not enough if it leaves people in spiritual darkness, heading for an eternity apart from God. Jesus was concerned for the physical hunger of those who came to hear him preach and multiplied loaves and fish in order to feed them. But he also fed their spirits with God's truth. So when we give bread we must say that we are doing it in Jesus' Name and when the opportunity arises, offer the bread of life who is Jesus Christ. The church's mission is to bring both physical bread and spiritual bread. It's not one or the other; it's both.

Constantly the devil tempts us to think that we really don't need God and every word that proceeds from his mouth. Bread is enough, he says. But the children of God know better. In the strength of Christ we must say to the devil, "No deal." And we must not only say it, we must act in a way that shows it.

The second major temptation the devil whispers in our ear is this, "You can have Christianity without a cross."

The devil was tempting Jesus to fulfill his mission without suffering and dying on the Cross. He was inviting Jesus to win people to God by another way. But in the strength of God's word, Jesus said to the devil, "No deal." Similarly, when the devil tempts us to have Christianity without a Cross, we must stand in the strength of Christ and say, "No deal."

Now our Cross is not the one Jesus carried. Only the sinless Son of God could carry that Cross. We can't pay for our sins and we don't have to because in his death Jesus made the sufficient, once-for-all sacrifice necessary for our salvation unto eternal life. No, the Cross in our Christian life refers to the cost that we must pay as followers of Jesus. The path of following Jesus is costly and demanding. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Anyone who wants to come after me must take up their Cross and follow me." If we are going to grow and mature in faith, if God's Kingdom is going to be established in people's hearts and expand in the world we have to pay a cost, a cost in money and in the time it takes to pray, to worship, to study scripture, to serve the church.

We see newer churches attracting crowds, making disciples, spreading the Gospel, expanding in size and mission, and wonder "Why isn't that happening for us? Why isn't God blessing us like that?" Well, we don't know all the ins and out of God's sovereign plan. But humanly speaking, if you look behind the scenes of these churches, you will find a group of

people making costly sacrifices in time and energy and money. It's no mystery. A church grows when enough people willingly pay the cost of making it happen.

Listen, somehow the devil has led us to believe that the church exists only to meet our needs. And indeed, the Gospel of Christ can and does meet our needs. In fact, your deepest needs have already been in the death and Resurrection of Christ, the One who comforts and strengthens you in life and in death. Your needs have been met and are being met now by the God who loves you and cares for you more than you can imagine. And all of this comes free of charge. But we often forget that when we receive these things we must then ask ourselves, "Now what can I give in return? What costly thing can I give or do for the sake of such love?" We all need to examine our hearts in this regard. Nothing significant happens in the church or in our own lives without a cost.

President John F. Kennedy memorably said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Kennedy meant that lots had been done for the American citizen. He or she was already a recipient of all the rights and freedoms and opportunities of being an American, rights and freedoms won at great cost. And in the light of what they had received, each person needed to ask themselves, "What now can I do for my country?"

Similarly, in light of the promises and blessings you have received from God through Christ; ask what you can do for Christ and his church. Yes, his blessings come by grace, but once you've received them by faith, there is a cost to pay if these blessings are to grow in you and if these same blessings are to reach the hearts of others and the Kingdom of God is to grow. Christ willingly paid a great cost for you; now you and I must willingly pay a cost for his sake. There is no Christianity worth its name without a Cross. It was true for Christ, and it's true for us. Don't let the devil fool you. When he whispers to us, "You can have Christianity without a Cross," we must stand in the strength of Christ and say, "No deal." And we not only say it, we show him that it is so.