

Never give in; never give up

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday in Lent, February 18, 2018

And the Spirit immediately drove him out in the wilderness...forty days, tempted by Satan... Mark 1:12-13

After his baptism, Jesus goes off to be alone in the desert wilderness to prepare for his ministry. He has to test himself to see if he can stand against the temptations he will have to face. It is there that he is tempted to make a spectacle of himself by turning stones into bread, jumping off a high pinnacle and landing safely, and finally to take command of all the kingdoms of the world. The price he will have to pay is to give in to the power of evil. The pressure to give in to these temptations is strong, but Jesus refuses to compromise himself. He will not give in. Having met his tests, he is ready to begin his ministry of teaching and healing. Jesus declares, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1:15)

The good news is that we are given value and made worthy in our redemption. We don't have to live with the burden of guilt for our faults and shortcomings. To repent is to turn our lives around and head in the direction of what is right and good and true.

From time to time all of us are tempted to do what we know is wrong. There is no sin in being tempted, only in giving in to it. Even though we know perfectly well the difference between right and wrong, we instinctively avoid responsibility by trying to rationalize our behavior. My tax accountant tells me that it is not unusual for clients to make false claims in reporting their income tax. Just because others are dishonest doesn't make it acceptable.

Temptations come in many forms. We are tempted to use people and love things instead of the other way around. We are tempted to get even by striking back at those who hurt us. We are tempted to economize on the truth when it is to our advantage. No amount of rationalization can justify doing what we know is wrong.

I have often wondered about the phrase in the Lord's Prayer, lead us not into temptation. It does not mean that God would lead us in to being tempted. It is when we are being tempted to do what we know is wrong that God leads us to do what is right. Though we sincerely try to do the right thing, our fallible nature will lead us to do what we know is wrong. We must never give up trying to do what we know is right.

There is an ancient legend about my namesake, Robert Bruce, the 14th century King of Scotland. In leading his army in the battle at Bannockburn, they were out numbered by the invading English army. The Scottish forces were defeated in battle after battle. Six times they fought bravely and six times they were defeated, leaving them in disarray. Weary and exhausted, King Robert the Bruce was ready to give up and accept defeat.

The legend is that he retreated in exhaustion into a cave in the woods. As he regained his strength, he watched a spider spinning its web. Six times the spider tried to attach its frail web from one point to another and six times it failed. Robert admired the spider's determination as it made a seventh try and this time succeeded in attaching its web. Inspired by the spider's determination, Robert resolved that if the spider could succeed on its seventh try, then he would make a seventh attempt to lead his army to victory. He rallied his exhausted army once more and this time the enemy invaders were overwhelmed and defeated. It is interesting to think that the course of Scottish history was determined by the inspiration of a tiny spider.

Each time we give in to temptation, we compromise ourselves. We try to negotiate our way through the temptations of anger, prejudice and desire for retribution. A well informed conscience tells us that we must never give in to what we know is wrong, no matter how tempting. We must never give up standing for what we know is right and good and true.

To claim that we can't change is to accept defeat without even trying. We can take control of the kind of person we want to be. It is during this Lenten season that we are asked to examine our faults and shortcomings and make practical changes to turn our lives around. Though change is difficult, it is always possible. We begin by changing in our attitude. We take control of our lives using both our head and heart to do what we have to do to improve ourselves.

Jesus was subject to the same temptations as you and I. When he was weary, he became impatient. He responded with flashes of anger at the hypocrisy of religious leaders, at the moneychangers in the temple, and when his disciples tried to protect him from harm. His human side would have avoided suffering death on the cross, but he knew that his example of sacrifice was necessary.

We have all had people who have made life difficult for us. We can't help but wonder if God tests us with rude, narcissistic and arrogant people. I once knew someone like that who revealed that he didn't like himself. He resolved to turn his life around and with disciplined determination and the help of a therapist he changed his behavior, beginning with his attitude.

The disturbed young man involved in the mass shooting last week that left seventeen dead injuring others at a high school in Florida should never have been allowed to have a gun. Having lost both parents, he was apparently getting back at the school that expelled him for his threatening behavior. As long as the NRA and other lobbies keep hold on members of congress, we wait for the next inevitable event by our out of control gun culture.

How we handle our occasional anger is essential. It's not easy to discipline our selves. It's not easy to change the way we live. When we begin to falter, God gives us the strength and resources to press on. When faced with temptation, God is our hope and strength and Jesus as our best example.

Never give in; never give up. Never.