

## Sermons from Park Hill: February 10, 2008

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Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado

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February 10, 2008

Matthew 4: 1-11 and  
Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7

### **“The Devil *Did Not* Make You Do It”**

Oscar Wilde said, “I sometimes think that God, when creating humans, somewhat overestimated their ability.” So, when we find ourselves wondering, “Why in the world did I do that?” just consider it God’s fault. We can’t do any better than that. God made us and should have known better. The Apostle Paul asks: “Why do I do the very thing I do not want to do?” I have all the right intentions, but then what?

We could blame God for insufficient equipment. Or we could blame Eve, or blame the serpent who tempted poor Eve. We can say, “It’s not my fault. Eve made me do it because she let the serpent talk her into doing what she knew she wasn’t supposed to do.” And it’s been part of the human experience ever since.

Or we could take responsibility for our own actions. Our mother’s said it best – we *do* know better than

that. We have a moral compass. “The devil *did not* make you do it!”

Life is about tough choices; and about all-too-frequent temptations. Anyone who has tried to stop smoking, stop drinking, or put down the Doritos – fill in your own vice – knows how temptations can overwhelm our sense of what is right, or in some cases can actually kill us. Just a little more won’t hurt. Maybe that’s what Eve thought – one apple and just a little bit of total and complete knowledge. Unprepared, she was convinced of this by someone who didn’t have her best interests at heart.

I read somewhere that 75% of teenagers are asked at school once a day, every day, if they would like a cigarette. I don’t know if that’s actually true. But there is some truth in it. Our children are faced with incredibly tough choices every day, offered by people who don’t care a thing about them, who have absolutely no interest in their well-being. If we think someone else will take care of raising them, there are plenty of people out there who will gladly take them down the path of no return. Every day.

At church, we get to influence them once a *week* with progressive and inclusive values, but we don’t always show a lot of enthusiasm for it, or passion for expanding our outreach to youth beyond our own doors. And just think of all the other choices they face; there are serpents all over the place waiting to pounce on any perceived weakness. We need to do everything we can and more – provide them a solid foundation of faith and a way to understand their own spiritual power, a way to help them choose in a world that doesn’t really care about them, but would love to get their attention, money, and soul.

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And we should support those adults – parental figures of every kind – who struggle with the balance of freedom and caution, who have to navigate the amazingly helpful and deceptively destructive nature of things like the internet. Temptations, enticements, incentives are offered by serpents all around us.

Now you may think I'm only talking about personal morality, concerned with matters such as the condition of our soul on a heaven-bound trip. Personal issues; personal choices. That's only as far as some religion goes, as you know. Personal morality is essential. It cannot be ignored, but it's only half of it. The story of Adam and Eve and Jesus and the Devil are also about communal temptations and collective choices that affect millions of people.

For example, I am not an economist and no where near an expert, but, let's say, if jobs are being shipped overseas because the costs are too high here, and the worst culprit of all is the cost of employee health care, then why don't we do something about it? And if sick people, whose jobs are now somewhere else, are a real drain on state budgets because of an over-reliance on Medicaid, why don't we invest more in preventative medicine? If two-thirds of our economy depends on consumer spending – which I think sounds a little like Humpty Dumpty sitting on a wall – then what happens when too many of those consumers don't have a job and can't spend any money? How did we get here? What are the societal temptations offered by people who really don't care anything about us or the well-being of the whole? What bill of goods have we been sold – and can we do anything about it?

I'll never forget a story Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund told us at General Synod last

summer in Hartford. Deamonte Driver, a seventh grader in Prince George's County, Maryland, died because his mother couldn't find a dentist who would accept Medicaid and she couldn't afford an \$80 tooth extraction. His toothache got so bad she took him to a hospital emergency room where he was given medicine for a headache, sinusitis, and dental abscess and sent home. His condition worsened and they returned to the hospital where he was rushed to surgery because they discovered that the bacteria from his abscessed tooth had spread to his brain. Heroic efforts were made to save him, including two operations and eight weeks of additional care and therapy, totalling about \$250,000. Unfortunately it was too late and he died on February 25<sup>th</sup>. As Wright Edelman told the story – one of many – we sat in stunned disbelief. "The outrage is that Deamonte's life," she said, "could have been saved by a routine dental visit and an inexpensive extraction, if only Medicaid's reimbursement rates to providers weren't so low, causing Medicaid providers to be extremely scarce.

I'm not an economist and don't know much about the complexities of federal and state budgets, but I know that isn't right – and that too many people have been tempted by politicians and pundits to think that the problem is not ours but that Deamonte's mother should have gotten a third job to pay for that \$80 toothache. Temptations offered by serpents who don't really care a thing about the rest of us. Serpents trying to convince Christians that they should stick with their own concerns – smoking, drinking, and heaven – not the hell of poverty, racial injustice, and those help captive behind fences.

Eve hadn't yet eaten from the tree of knowledge – so perhaps we can't blame her for her choices. What's the excuse of everyone else? But before I get too

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high and mighty about those who *are* the high and mighty, remember the temptation to sit in judgment. As fast as some take the temptation of the sweet taste of money, power, and fame, others feed on another sugary temptation – either to simply blame or claim someone else will deal with it. “It is of no concern to me.” Or the temptation to remain stuck in despair, to believe there is no hope, to act like nothing matters anyway.

According to Genesis, from the beginning of humanity, from the very first human, we have had to make choices based on the temptations offered by serpents. Remember, we’re not talking about a literal snake hanging from a tree talking to Eve. It’s a myth. According to Joseph Campbell, the wonderful author of *The Power of Myth*, a myth is something that “never was but always is.” It isn’t an historical account, but it states a truth that opens our minds and hearts to recognize reality as it is. Stories from Genesis try to explain such things as “where do we come from,” and “why do we do what we do.” For example, can we recognize that we face temptations by serpents – and that we need to examine who they are, what they really want, how they try to get us not to care about just a little bit more for myself? Who is really the big beneficiary of that?

Why did Eve want to try the forbidden fruit? The myth says that she was told it would give her power – to know. We may not think that power is a temptation in our lives, but how often do we want to be right? Whether it’s an argument or just a conversation, don’t we want to be right? And doesn’t that try to hold power over someone else? Wouldn’t we like to have the power of all knowledge? Then we wouldn’t have to struggle with tough choices. But if we were all-knowing, we would have no need of

faith, and without the need for faith, we would have no need of God – and we would *be* God.

Author Henri Nouwen, asks: What makes the temptation of power so irresistible? Maybe it’s that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to *be* God than to *love* God; easier to *control* people than to *love* people; easier to *own* life than to *love* life.

But, again, it’s also deceptively and dangerously tempting to claim we have *no* power. It’s always easier to focus on what we don’t have, our limitations, than to gaze around us, like Adam and Eve, and see that everything we need is already provided. Something else is going on here.

The serpent or the devil – remember, myths – of something beautiful and irresistible offer us the easy question: “Why not?” When God said you can have everything you can see, everything you need, but leave that one thing alone – the thing that once we’ve heard about, we just *have* to have – Eve decided the serpent was right: “Why not?” Remember those billboards with quotes from God? My favorite was, “The love one another thing...I meant it.”

Another of my favorite authors, Kathleen Norris, wrote: One year my women’s circle at church asked me to conduct the Bible study session on the Antichrist. I wondered at the time whether this was my punishment for having missed so many meetings during the year. I went to see the pastor, hoping that he could help me. He quickly summarized and dismissed the tendency that Christians have always had to identify the Antichrist with their personal

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enemies, or with those in power they detest. It's an easy temptation. But, what the pastor said was so simple that it will remain with me forever. "Each one of us acts as an Antichrist whenever we hear the gospel and do not do it."

I listened to Deepak Chopra on NPR one day talk about the condition of our personal and political soul and he made an excellent point: that things are not neatly divided into good and evil, right and wrong. Each of our souls carries the potential to be divine and diabolical. We are in fact involved in all of it – good and evil, right and wrong. We *are*, he said, both divine and diabolical. And perhaps that explains why I so often do the very thing I do not want to do – because I have not practiced enough self-awareness and enough God-awareness. Because I haven't considered my neighbor.

This is a bigger reason than ever to pay attention to the gift of Lent. To stop. Look at what we are doing. Listen with the ear of our heart, as the Rule of Benedict says, and *do* the very things we are called to do. Recognize our temptation to claim we have no part in how things are. Recognize how easy it is to divide our personal moral choices from our communal responsibility for the poor and vulnerable and the young people in our midst.

Used well, Lent is an invitation to purposeful listening, a time away to face and prepare, as Jesus did, for some of our toughest choices. Lent is not a time to escape reality; we must be preparing to face it. Some may think it's a matter of choosing spiritual formation *or* social justice. But, we must be spiritually grounded to pursue social justice. For some, Lent is a time to recognize and give up what is preventing the fullness of our life. For other people,

Lent is a time when we must pick up what is preventing the fullness of life for our neighbors. What, who, is being neglected? Is this your year to give up or pick up? Or both?

In Lent we can stop and ask: What choices have I made that I didn't even know I had chosen. Have we let some of our basic ideals erode by following the sweet scent of power – to know, to be right? Have we let go of ideals that subtly led us beyond what we had always said, "This will be the final straw." Just a little bit more. Do we dare look? Do we have the strength of faith to commit to the struggle; do we have the spiritual foundation to face our personal and communal temptations to say: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth."

In the gospel of Matthew, the preparation Jesus needed to face his temptations was silence and prayer. He was baptized and immediately driven into the wilderness for 40 days of starvation and loneliness, to face and choose the daunting tasks – his whole life – that lay ahead of him. Fortunately for *us*, we are not in this alone. We have each other to help us recognize and move beyond whatever seeks to push us off our path, and to help others find theirs.

I love Oscar Wilde's joke that God must have overestimated the abilities of humans. But I think he's wrong. God gave us everything we need. We just think the tree in the middle of the garden would be little bit better than the abundance we already have.

When our love has become too narrow, our excuses too wide, our blaming too quick, our forgiveness too slow, our gratitude too rare, May God forgive us. And help us choose what is right once again – for ourselves and for everybody.