

In the Face of Temptation
I Corinthians 10:1-13
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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How many parents, in trying to help their teenaged children make good choices, have said, "Trust me, I know..." and then gone on to tell a story of some misguided choice from their own teenage years in hopes that their children wouldn't have to make their own mistakes?

Even though we know it often doesn't work, still we try. Because if our children could learn about making good decisions, or managing their time and money, or standing up to peer pressure based on our mistakes, not only would they live a simpler life, but we would be able to breathe a little easier.

And it seems like Paul is coming from that same perspective in today's text. Here he is, writing to the church at Corinth, a church which he founded and cared for deeply. This congregation was a Gentile Christian community who would not have known the stories of the Jewish faith in the ways that Paul did. But, there were stories he hoped they could learn from and so he told them. He told them the tales of their Jewish ancestors practicing idolatry and choosing other gods. He told them the tales of their immoral choices.

And he didn't do this because they were interesting stories, but because the people of old had faced some of the same temptations that the people of Corinth knew. And Paul hoped that their example could help.

Because here, in Corinth, those who had chosen to follow the ways of Jesus were faced daily with other choices. They lived in a large city that was a center of trade. They met people from other places and, as a trading and traveling center, Corinth also became a center for religion with temples built to many different gods. This meant they were exposed to religious practices that were not only different from their own, but some of which were immoral. After all, temple prostitution was among the practices popular in Corinth.

In addition to these practices, they simply faced the daily temptation to choose the ways and values of the world rather than the ways and values of Jesus. This meant that they were often fighting an internal fight around questions of money and selfishness, priorities and care of others.

It is into this context that Paul is writing as he reminds them that if they are going to be Christians, they are making a choice to be different from many of their neighbors. They are making choices to share generously rather than hoard for themselves, to appreciate the giftedness of others rather than competing for the most recognition, to follow in the ways of the one God rather than to participate in the practices of other gods.

This whole letter, which we know as I Corinthians, is addressing various aspects of the struggle the Corinthian Christians face. And in this particular section, it is addressing the struggle of temptation.

And this might surprise you. After all, the familiar and too often used quote, “God won’t give you more than you can handle” is often understood to be rooted in I Corinthians 10:13. But, if we read carefully, we will discover that it is a misrepresentation, especially in the way it is usually used.

And, yes, for those of you who worshipped with us last week, what I am saying today might sound a lot like what I said last week as we explored the passage from Matthew about worry. The reason you feel that way is because there is a common theme. Too often we take quotes from scripture out of context and use them in ways that support our beliefs, or make us comfortable, or satisfy some other self-identified need.

So, I will remind you, as I did last week, that context matters. Just as the passage from Matthew was not a reference to generalized worry, but rather to the worry that comes when we are consumed by wealth and accumulation...this week’s passage is not offering good advice for any hardship, but rather is speaking directly to temptation.

We have all probably known someone whose life seems to be one crisis after another - they have a scary medical diagnosis, then they lose their job and their health insurance with it. Just when they seem to be getting back on their feet their car breaks down and needs a new transmission, and before they’ve even gotten it back from the mechanic their parent dies.

When this is your friend or loved one, please, please do not go to them thinking you are quoting scripture and bringing comfort by saying, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

We’ve probably all heard the response that strives for humor as people have said, “I wish God didn’t have so much confidence in me.”

But the reality is that this attempt at comfort is neither comforting nor faithful to the meaning of the text, nor is it humorous. Rather, it is too often our attempt at making ourselves feel better and less at risk when we see another’s pain.

Read the passage from I Corinthians. Here Paul is not talking about generalized life challenges, but is specifically talking about temptation. He is talking about the things that lead us away from the ways of God and into sin.

Here it is also important to remember that Paul does not say that God is *giving* us temptation, but rather that when we face temptation, God is there with us and will help us find our way out.

And, ultimately, we are reminded that this passage is about relationship. Friends, the closer we are to someone, the more time we spend with them, the more of an impact they have on who we are. If that can be said of other humans, then it is certainly true of God.

If we are honest, there are many things in this world that pull us away from the priorities of God. Many temptations that offer us another way to go, another set of values to choose. And temptation is not just about money and power, sex and drugs. Temptation is all around us whenever anything in the ways that we live and love, that we spend our money and our time...when anything directs us away from the priorities of Jesus.

And yet we are reminded, not only that people across time and space have experienced the same temptation that we know, but also that God is with us and can help us stay the course.

Again, we are back to relationships. Just as the people in our lives help shape who we are, the more time we spend with God, the more God's values will become part of who we are, and the more we will choose the ways that Jesus chose.

This doesn't mean our lives will be easy. It doesn't mean we won't have hard times. It doesn't even mean that temptation will disappear. But it does mean that we will never be alone.

Alcoholics Anonymous has long practiced the importance of relationships. Not only does every member have a sponsor upon whom they can call whenever they are struggling, but people in AA know that wherever they find themselves, help is only a meeting or a phone call away.

Similarly, Paul reminds the Corinthians and us that God is ever present. God is with us in all things and is willing to help us see the way out. The more time we spend intentionally in God's presence, the more clearly we will see God's ways.

Life can be hard. Temptations can overwhelm us. But we do not do this alone. You are not on your own...God is with you. Amen.