The Wilderness Temptations of Ministry

As Jesus was sent by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted, so are we. It may be that the true quality of the spiritual life can only be recognized in the face of our temptations. Three temptations by which we are confronted again and again in the desert of our daily ministry are the temptation to be relevant, the temptation to be spectacular, and the temptation to be powerful. All three are temptations to return to the ways of the world of upward mobility. All three temptations divert us from our mission to reveal Christ to the world.

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The temptation to be relevant

The first temptation with which the Devil accosted Jesus was that of turning stones into loaves. This is the temptation to be relevant, to do something that is needed and can be appreciated by people. "When you feed people, you are worth your pay. When you can solve immediate and crying needs of your people, you are doing a real job. What is the value of speaking of God to hungry people with neither shelter, clothing, nor food? What is needed are people who can alleviate theses immediate needs and offer necessary help and support. Doctors can heal, lawyers can defend, bankers can finance, social workers can restructure. But what can you ministers do? How can you make your presence felt?" This is the tempter speaking.

Let us not underestimate this temptation. It touches us at the center of our identity. In a great variety of ways we are made to believe that we are what we produce. This leads to a preoccupation with products, visible results, tangible goods, and progress. In the ministry, productivity consists of many church members, many projects, and many meetings. Thus a certain busyness characterizes our ministerial life. We become as busy as those in business and with an agenda as full as that of politicians. Before we know it, we find ourselves yielding to the temptation to turn stones into loaves by conducting a fruitful, productive ministry. We try to prove to other busy people that we are equally busy and thus deserve to be taken seriously.

The temptation to be relevant is difficult to shake off since it is usually not considered a temptation but a call. We make ourselves believe that we are called to productive, successful, and efficient individuals whose words and actions show that working for the kingdom is at least as dignified an occupation as working for General Electric, Mobil, or the U.S. government. But all of this is giving in to the temptation to be relevant and respectable in the eyes of the world.

The temptation to be spectacular

The devil took Jesus to the Holy City, made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for the scripture says: 'He will put you in his angels' charge, and they will support you on their hands in case you hurt your foot against a stone'" (Matt. 4:5-6).

The temptation to do something spectacular has not lessened since Jesus' days. We all know about the Madison Avenue style of ministry. We do not have to point to drive-in churches and glass cathedrals because we, too, have fallen victim to the notion that value can be measured by the number of spectators. We have come to believe

that a service is valuable when many attend, a protest meeting is worthwhile when TV cameras are present, a study group is worth having when many want to be a part of it, and a church is successful when many desire to become members.

It is difficult for us to believe that salvation came from the remnant of Israel. It is difficult for us to believe that something very good came from an unknown place. It is difficult for us to believe that our God is a God who came in the unspectacular form of a servant, who entered Jerusalem on an ass, and who was killed as a common criminal. And it is even more difficult to believe that a few unsophisticated fishermen brought God's good news to the world.

How do we overcome this all-pervading temptation to be spectacular? It is important to realize that our hunger for the spectacular—just as our desire to be relevant—has much to do with our search for selfhood. Being a person and being seen, praised, liked, and accepted have become nearly the same for many. Who am I when nobody pays attention, says thanks, or recognizes my work?

Our true challenge is to return to the center, to the heart, to the gentle voice that speaks to us and affirms us in a way no human voice ever could. The basis of all ministry is the experience of God's unlimited and unlimiting acceptance so full, so total, and all embracing that it sets us free to move in the world and act creatively even when we receive little response, even when we are laughed at and rejected, and even when our words and actions lead to death.

The temptation to acquire power

The devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms and their splendor and said, "I will give you all these, if you fall at my feet and worship me" (Matt. 4:8-9).

There is probably no culture in which people are so unabashedly encouraged to seek power as ours. From the moment we present ourselves as the best representative of our grade school class to the moment we try to convince our country that we will be the best possible president, we convince ourselves that striving for power and wanting to serve are the same. This fallacy is so deeply ingrained we rarely hesitate to reach for influential positions because we're certain that we do so for the good of the kingdom of God. What good can come from powerlessness? In this country of pioneers and self-made achievers, where ambition is praised from the first moment we enter school until we enter the competitive world of free enterprise, we cannot imagine that any good can come from giving up power or not even desiring it.

Surrounded by so much power, it is difficult for us ministers not to surrender to the temptation to seek power like everyone else. But the mystery of our ministry is that we are called to serve not with our power but with our powerlessness. It is through powerlessness that we can enter into solidarity with our fellow human beings, form a fellowship of the weak, and thus reveal the healing, guiding, and sustain mercy of God. We are called to speak to people not where they are strong but where they are weak, not where they have it together but where they are aware of their pains, not where they are in control but where they are trembling and insecure, not where they are self-assured and assertive but where they doubt and raise hard questions. In short, not where they live in the illusion of immortality but where they are ready to face their broken, mortal, and fragile humanity.

But the temptation of power is subtle. Often, before we fully realize it, servanthood becomes a power game. Then we think: "I can do something no doctor, no social worker, no psychologist, no businessperson, and no politician can do. When it comes to real life crises, people need me, and I can speak and act in a powerful way. When people are born, I baptize them; when they reach maturity, I confirm them; when they want to build a home, I marry them; when they are in fear of death, I offer them the sacred oil; and all through life I strengthen them with the words of the Scripture and nurture them with the sacred gifts of bread and wine. So it is that in the Word and sacrament my real power rests".

When Jesus was tempted with power, he said to the tempter, "You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone." These words remind

us that only undivided attention to God can make a powerless ministry possible. So long as we divide our time and energy between God and our fellow human beings, we forget that service outside of God becomes self-seeking, and self-seeking service leads to manipulation, and manipulation to power games, and power games to violence, and violence to destruction, even when it all is called ministry…

…The temptations of being relevant, spectacular, and powerful stay with us all of our lives. They are strong because they play directly on our desire to join others in the upwardly mobile road. They tell us, "You are nothing when you are not useful, when nobody pays attention to you, and when you have no real influence." This is difficult to listen to, especially for us who have our full share in the anxieties, insecurities, and self-doubts of the human race.

But when we are able to recognize these temptations as seductive attempts to make us cling to the illusions of the false self, we can see them as invitations to claim our true self, which is hidden in God and in him alone. Thus true ministry becomes for us the way to salvation. When we find ourselves able to continue to serve our fellow human beings even when their lives remain the same, even when few people offer us praise, and even when we have less and less power, then we come to know ourselves as God knows us, as sons and daughters hidden in his love.

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