

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2025

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-2

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:1-10

Are temptations on the rise? The bible tells us that there is nothing new under the sun, and that is true (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Since Eve reached out her hand and took some of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, temptations have been a steady part of man's diet. But are there more today? Has the devil coopted culture so much that he has carved temptation into every facet of our common life? If one has the slightest inclination toward some particular perversion, there's an app for that. To reinforce what used to be standard morality, to expect that people behave in a way that suppresses our worst inclinations out of concern for our neighbor is laughed at with derision. But are temptations really on the rise?

Has the nature of man changed? Are your struggles the same as those who lived in the time of Christ? Were our ancient mothers and fathers in the faith longing for justice, longing for truth to shine with unquestioned authority, longing for genuine devotion for the things of God to win the day? Your mother and your father – did they encounter the dragons of guilt and shame in the same way that you do? Did your mother's mother struggle with forgiving those who hurt her with little regard for their transgression? Did your father's father lament to God that He is taking too long, that He is too permissive with those who slander His name and harm His church?

Habakkuk was on a tear. He ripped into God for what Habakkuk perceived as God's lack of action. Like the Sons of Thunder, Habakkuk wants retributive justice, and he wants it now! King David spoke a similar word, albeit more politely, when he wrote this: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" (Psalm 13:1-2). Temptation is an enemy. If you want to avoid temptation you better find a pretty isolated place. Do you know who will be with you, even in a supremely isolated place? Your sinful nature. You can't escape it. St. Paul wrote this: "So I find this law at work: when I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (Romans 7:21 NIV). Jesus said: "Temptations to sin are sure to come" (Luke 17:1). How does that make you feel? Defeated? Beleaguered? On another occasion, the Lord Christ looked out upon a crowd, people just like us, and saw that they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). Does temptation make you feel harassed and helpless?

God loves justice. It's a severe word that Jesus adds to the bit about temptation being an ever-present part of life in this flesh. "Woe to the one *through whom* [temptation] comes. It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin" (Luke 17:2 – emphasis mine). A millstone is a beast of a weight. A millstone was used to grind wheat into flour – a typical millstone back in the day weighed 3,000lbs. Try swimming with that around your neck. God is certainly paying attention to those who traffic in tempting man to abandon what is good. A millstone around your neck would carry you to deepest part of the Mariana Trench in a matter of seconds. Jesus says that would be preferable to what is in store for those who cause His little ones to stumble. Woof!

God knows who the purveyors of temptation are and in due time those who put His little ones at risk will have to answer to Him.

In the very next breath, Jesus is talking about forgiveness. It's not a coincidence. Have you been part of a congregation that wasn't particularly forgiving? Would the little ones, new believers, the young and impressionable, be at risk in that congregation? Would they begin to believe that this forgiveness business is just for show? Would the pretense of forgiveness eventually find its way to Christ and His blood, Christ and His sacrifice, Christ and His means of grace? Now the temptation to sin is not in someone else's lap, it's in yours, it's in mine. If you confess Christ with your mouth but clearly don't forgive those who sin against you then you are perhaps causing one of Christ's little ones to be tempted to abandon the faith. People sin against you. It's not going to change. It's true and it's uncomfortable and it's difficult and it's unwelcome and nobody likes it. Your impulse is to hold them accountable. Good. Then they repent and they ask for forgiveness, and you delay, you hedge, you make them prove their sincerity. No! Forgiveness is our hallmark. Forgiveness is why we are here. Forgiveness is the cross around your neck. Forgiveness is our altar, our processional crucifix, and our baptismal font.

Some of you might be consternated that we don't applaud in church. Why do you suppose that is, that we don't applaud in the Divine Service? Other congregations do it. Every now and then, a visitor will expect to clap after the choir sings a beautiful piece, or after the children present one of their hymns. And... nothing. They probably think that we're a cold bunch. Is that why we don't applaud, because we're cold? Does God applaud when you forgive your brother, your sister? This is the story that Jesus tells about you and me: "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:7-10).

As a pastor, I'm not waiting for God's applause when I plow the vineyard at Ford and South Streets, or when I keep the sheep of His flock. It's my duty. To be sure, most of us pastor types like knowing that our work is appreciated, but we are slaves to Christ, not slaves to our ego. I'm not to burnish my reputation but discharge the duties of my office in a way that Christ has instructed (Galatians 6:14). Forgiveness is a big part of that for me and you. Because of our sin, we should have a millstone round our neck. That's what we deserve. But forgiveness came to us *before* we asked. God's initiative, God's love, God's plan, God's sacrifice, God's glory, God's grace. The millstone of justice was hung around the Lord Christ's neck. It was God's justice, not man's. Jesus took all our sin and was punished. He is the bread of life, ground by the Father on the cross to be the source of forgiveness for all humanity. Taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). Taste His forgiveness and know that His love feeds you. His love, His forgiveness is at work in you. You now, as Christ's disciple, act as He acted. To act in a way that is *contrary* to how He acts is to cause little ones to stumble and we simply can't do that.

Our choir is beautiful in our eyes, our ears, but they, like us, are unworthy servants. Our delightful children, when they sing, are unworthy servants, and we won't rob them of humility

and the simple joy of serving by applauding. There are some who serve Christ for earthly perks, earthly accolades, earthly laurels. When they get them, they have their reward. Our frame of mind is driven by Christ's words: "When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:2-4 NIV).

The Lord sees us. When He saw the harassed and helpless He was moved with compassion. His compassion led Him to Golgotha. His compassion is our strength. His compassion is His cross and empty tomb. We are the forgiven saints of Christ the King. We live in His grace. We are full of His love. He does not lead us into temptation, but He delivers us from evil. This is most certainly true.