

Expiry Date on Desire

A sermon based on Matthew 4:1-11 and Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

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A department store was the victim of vandalism one night when, as a prank, the intruders changed the price tags on a whole host of merchandise. The situation was discovered the next morning when a clerk rang up a vacuum cleaner for five dollars! A quick check revealed more mis-tagged items, such as candles for a hundred dollars each; leather luggage for ten dollars; and so on. Indeed, the store had to close shop for a full day in order to recheck all the merchandise and assign the correct prices.

The season of Lent is a time for a “price check,” if you will—a time to close shop for a while and take a hard look at the values by which we live, and to make whatever value adjustments are needed in order to live the “full value” of the life to which God has called us.

The Blessings of Desire

On a Sunday on which we recite and remember Jesus’ temptations, it may be an appropriate occasion to look at the nature of desire. God endowed us with desire, and that’s a good thing. When a doctor swats a newborn to activate the breathing process, there would be little response without an inborn desire to live! Other desires, like the desire to eat and rest and sleep are fairly basic to our existence. To these we add other layers of desire, like the desire to grow, discover, and learn. We may add the desire to please, to love, to be loved, to marry, and to have children. To these we add still more layers of desire, like the desire to acquire things—houses, property, consumer goods, and if our desires be strong, lots of consumer goods.

Desire is a powerful motivator. A violin teacher found that his young protégé wasn’t practicing much; what the boy really wanted was to be a baseball pitcher. “Well, look at it this way,” said the teacher, “the more you fiddle, the stronger your pitching arm will be!” Desires can be channelled, indeed, must be channelled. Dave Fransen tells me that a promising hockey player can be ruined if brought along too fast, before developing sufficient maturity to put his desires into perspective. On the other hand, an athlete can be blessed with all kinds of native ability, but without a strong desire to achieve will not achieve much. Thus, a role for coaches, who try to instill the desire to win, and maintain that desire from game to game.

The importance and power of desire in relation to achievement can also be seen in other fields of human endeavour. Consider, for example, Richard Wagner (1813-83), the German composer, who, in spite of poor health, set down the millions of notes in his operas; built his theatre; taught the players; conducted the performances; wrote innumerable other works on a dozen philosophical and aesthetic subjects; wrote his opera texts; and had time for a correspondence of as many as six long letters a day.

The power of desire has long been known and exploited by sales and marketing people. A young salesman who was disappointed because he had lost an important sale was discussing it with his manager, saying, “It just proves you can lead a horse to water, but

you can't make him drink." To which the manager replied, "Your job is not to make him drink. It's to make him thirsty."

The Harvard Business Review recently cited the case of a Mr. Jantzen, who was making swimsuits in the 1920s, at a time when public swimming was openly denounced by the Association of American Police Chiefs and the baring of legs was considered "unchaste". The story of Jantzen's campaign to instill desire for swimsuits is a classic one in marketing. He built a theme park in California, featuring a huge inland swimming pool, and sold swimsuits to those who entered the park. He worked with the police chiefs to convince them that swimming was exercise, and exercise leads to good health, and good health is ... good! The chiefs of police eventually backed public swimming wholeheartedly, so much so that municipalities across the country began to build public swimming pools.

Jantzen sold a lot of swimsuits, but swimming for health means that you need only one swimsuit per person, so Jantzen graduated to the next level of marketing in order to instill the desire to own more swimsuits. One might, for example, want a certain type of suit for romantic reasons; another to reflect your social status; another to reflect your individuality; or, on the other hand, your group identity. You might want another one to celebrate a special event; or, using the ploy that marketers drag out when nothing else works, you may want to own another swimsuit "just because"—an opportunity to indulge in the joy of a spontaneous purchase. And what worked for swimsuits works for every other product we've been convinced to buy, from cellophane to cell phones. (Betty Moore, "Use basic instincts to trigger market demand," Ottawa Citizen)

Human desire, the deep longing for something, has proved a powerful motivation over the centuries, but already, long before Christianity, there were at least two schools of thought about it. The Epicureans, intoxicated with the pleasure of desire, thought that desires should be indulged in order to fully experience life's fullness! Pleasure is the highest and only good, they said. Desires are the impulses of life; act upon them—"Eat, drink, and be merry!" On the other end of the spectrum were the Stoics, who downplayed desires, saying they must be disciplined, subjected, kept in check, even denied, lest they lead to untoward, if not perverted behaviour.

Our biblical tradition settled in somewhere between these two schools of thought, with a little bit of "do" and a little bit of "don't" . On the one hand, the Bible tells us that God satisfies the desire of "every living thing". (Psalm 145:16) "(God) fulfills the desire of all who fear him...." (Psalms 145:19) The Book of Proverbs tells us that "a desire realized is sweet to the soul...." (13:19) The Bible lifts up those, like our spiritual forebears, Abraham and Sarah, who "desire a better country," a better state of affairs, a better world.

The Limits of Desire

On the other hand, there is also a sober recognition in the Scriptures that our desires can run awry. There are the rather intelligent warnings about those "who desire strong drink" (Proverbs 31:4) The Old Testament philosopher, in Ecclesiastes, speaks of the "wandering" nature of desire, saying this too is "vanity and a chasing after wind" (6:9). 1 Corinthians commends those who have their desire—in this case sexual desire—"under control". (7:37) Jesus warned his followers about conflicting desires, lest, as he said, "the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing." (Mark 4:19)

Other biblical writers speak more harshly of desire. Paul, in his letter to Colossian Christians talks of “evil desire” (3:5), and the writer of 1 John says that “the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world” (2:16), and that “the world and its desire are passing away”. (2:17) Their satisfactions are fleeting. The New Testament book of James speaks of the subtle attractiveness of desire, saying that “one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it...” (1:14) Such desire, gone awry, is very dangerous, he says, for “when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.” (1:15)

It struck me that the Bible’s twin attitudes about desire, recognizing both the legitimacy of desire, and the dangers of desire, might be likened to the bags of milk we keep in our refrigerators. Excepting those who suffer from lactose intolerance, milk is a good thing, and lest we have any doubt about it, the beautiful ads placed by the Dairy Producers of Ontario leave no doubt about the natural and healthy benefits of milk. Like other perishable items, however, the milk we buy has an expiry date on it. There is a point on the calendar beyond which that milk is not good. Over the years I have often run into this kind of milk in our church kitchen. Not only is the milk no longer good, there is a point at which it becomes downright repulsive!

Similarly, desire itself is a good thing; its anticipations and satisfactions are many. Its ability to motivate us is powerful, but there is a point beyond which desire, like milk, becomes spoiled. Some of these expiry dates, or points, are rather obvious. The Ten Commandments, for example, lay out some obvious expiry points, telling us that desire for a spouse is a good thing, but when that person is already a spouse, a spouse of someone else, then that person is off limits! Desire for a house or other property is not in itself a bad thing, but when it already belongs to your neighbour, and he or she is not prepared to part with it, then it’s off limits!

The early moral theologians had a good sense of desire’s limits, and had a wonderful Latin term for it: “delectatio morosa,” the word, “morosa” meaning “delay”. It represented their attempt to place responsibility not so much in the existence of corrupting thoughts as in the mind’s harbouring of them. Thomas Aquinas spoke of evil thought as a “sin of lingering delectation,” our habit, in his words, of “holding to and revolving with pleasure what ought to have been thrust out as soon as it reached the mind.” (Summa Theologica). Their concern was not necessarily sexual; their concern was with the sin of intent, whatever the nature of the intent.

The Attractive Temptations of Jesus

I think that it is in recognizing the attractive face of temptation that we begin to understand the nature of Jesus’ temptations. The Tempter who tested Jesus in the wilderness presented scenarios that were attractive to Jesus. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread,” said the Tempter (Matthew 4:3). “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down (from the pinnacle of the temple),” coaxed the Tempter (4:6). Then, showing him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, the Tempter said, in his best marketing voice, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” (4:9)

The most insidious temptations appeal, not to our weakness, but to our strength.” The strength of a temptation is in the attractiveness of its goal (G. B. Caird), and it was Jesus’ goals that made the Tempter’s scenarios so enticing. What could be better than

to use his messianic power to fill everyone's belly and let God pick up the tab? The elimination of hunger and poverty are certainly in line with the goals of the kingdom of God. There is little shame attached to such a desire! And indeed, Jesus did on occasion provide bread for the hungry. (Matthew 14)

Jesus second temptation, the temptation to be spectacular, seems somewhat crass—a Steven Spielberg “special effects” type of temptation—but the God Jesus knew was a God of signs and people were always requesting signs. Doing the unexpected, the entertaining, the sensational would appeal to them and give glory to God! Swan diving from the top of the temple without a safety net just might do the trick. And Jesus had no doubt about relying on God's protection, for later, when he was being arrested, he said to the disciple who tried to defend him, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53)

And Jesus' third temptation, the immediate possibility of the kingdom of God on earth with Jesus at its head must have been a political carrot hard to resist. A shortcut to success! Presto! Rule the world. Go with what works. Go for love of power instead of the power of love.

Jesus was tempted to do what he had the power and desire to do. Still wet from his baptism, Jesus had seen the heavens open, a dove descend, and heard the voice of God say, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” Anything was possible. Where could he go wrong?

Jesus' temptations are not unlike the temptations faced by our spiritual forebears in the Garden of Eden. There the first couple are confronted with the fulfillment of three classical values, for the tree that was off limits was “good for food,” it was a “delight to the eyes”—aesthetic appeal—and it held the promise of wisdom—the acquisition of knowledge and truth. (Genesis 3:6) Only the fruit offered to Adam and Eve had an expiry date. Their partaking of it marks the point at which humanity begins to seek its ends and values autonomously, without reference to the will of God. The consumption of that spoiled fruit has left a rotten aftertaste with us for all time. It reminds us that even the noblest of values can turn sour if aspired to without humility, without reference to God's sovereignty.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote compellingly of the New Testament's love ethic and of its power to inspire and nurture human community, but said, “...the most stubborn evil in human life appears precisely at the point where the forces which make for community have been extended far enough to create large social aggregates which are not large enough to include the total human community and are yet powerful enough to dominate and destroy life beyond themselves.”

Conclusion

In the 1920s, apparently, there was a play entitled, “Suppressed Desires”. To my recollection, I have seen no play or movie of late with such a title. It is not in the temper of our times to suppress anything. It is in the best interests of our mental health, we are told, to hide nothing. Perhaps. The season of Lent, far from being a season of suppressing desires—though some desires might benefit from suppression—is a season inviting us to examine them, and to learn some modesty about both their acquisition and fulfillment. It's a modesty of which Garrison Keillor speaks at the closing of one of his books when he writes, “Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but

getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.” (Lake Wobegon Days, last page)

As we enter this season of Lent, it is an opportunity to take a hard look at the values by which we live, and to make value adjustments in order to live the “full value” of the life to which God has called us. The “full value” of the life to which God calls us includes not only an enhanced modesty about our own desires, it invites us to focus on the desires and pleasure of God. May our prayer be the prayer of Thomas Aquinas, when he prayed, “O merciful God, grant that I may eagerly desire, carefully search out, truthfully acknowledge, and ever perfectly fulfill all things which are pleasing to Thee; to the praise and glory of Thy name.” AMEN

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.