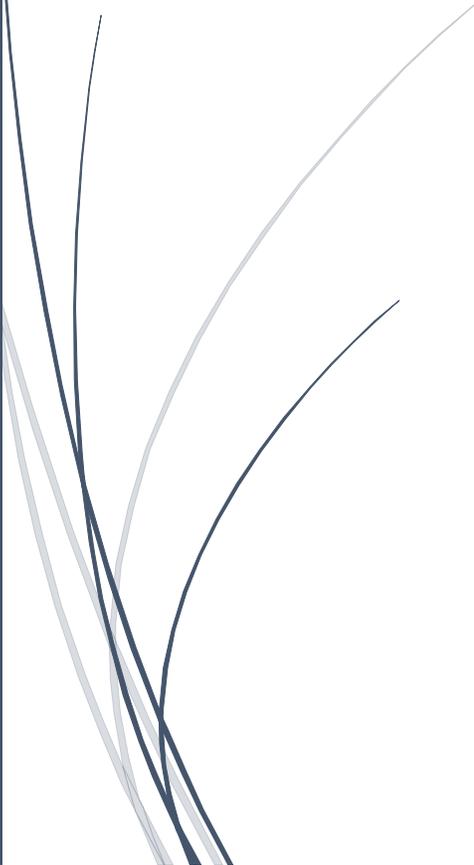




3/13/2016

The Gift of Temptation

Part 5 in the series: "Gifts of the Dark Wood"



Pastor Brad

When was the last time you were tempted to do something really evil? I'm not talking about taking too much dessert or gossiping a bit more than you should about a neighbor or coworker. And remember, everyone has the occasional evil fantasy, like throwing your boss out the window after that undeserving so-and-so got *your* promotion.

But if you haven't actually thrown your boss out the window, or done any more than entertain brief fantasies about things like that, then doing great evil probably isn't a significant temptation. And if you're not tempted to do great evil, but you still feel a restlessness or yearning – you feel far from your path, somewhere along the way you've probably succumbed to the temptation of doing good.

The temptation of doing good – like that's a bad thing...?

The gist of this chapter is not the temptation of doing wrong, but the temptation of doing good – meaning the wrong good. Elnes is talking about doing good that's not yours to do. "It may be someone else's good to do."

Remember Hermey, the elf from Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer? Here we have somebody who's doing really good work. I mean, making toys for children? For Christmas? It doesn't get more 'good' than that! But Hermey isn't happy in his work. He doesn't like making toys. Hermey wants to be a dentist. When he talks about fixing dolls' teeth – bicuspid and molars – he lights up. At least I think he lights up – he's a puppet. The point is the call of dentistry was much more central to his life than the good work of making toys.

Hermey acted on the temptation to do the wrong good, but he couldn't keep up with the line and that triggered questions in Hermey – and in his boss. "What's eating you?" he asked. And when Hermey thought about it he finally knew his call.

Hermey's frustration eventually drove him to take a giant risk -- trading his steady job for a chance to 'swim in his elemental waters,' like that swan we talked about, awkwardly waddling across dry land toward his elemental waters in the dentist's office.

Fun fact: I was googling this to get my facts straight, and I came across an article in the Washington Examiner. To honor the 50th anniversary of the beloved Christmas special, The American Dental Association granted Hermey a "DDG," or "Dental Do Gooder" certificate. ADA President Maxine Feinberg said, "Hermey's passion for dentistry, coupled with his devotion to helping others feel good about themselves inside and out, deserves recognition."

Notice what led Hermey to find his distinctive calling – what gave him the courage to take the plunge in his elemental waters wasn't intelligence or ability. His unhappiness was the gift.

The Dark Wood gift of temptation to do good – to make toys for children – produced the necessary results to open Hermey’s eyes, heart, and mind to the idea that maybe he wasn’t on a path that was central to who he was. The skills people usually use—and this came up last week – the gifts of logic and reason can be surprisingly unhelpful in these situations. Logic and reason say, “...think of all the good you’re doing here! – Think of the children!”

Even if you’re not making toys, “Think of all the people counting on you...” “What about your pension?” Finding our unique life path takes courage. It also takes imagination and instinct, and a little nudging from the Holy Spirit.

BTW, those of us who find ourselves wrestling with the temptation to do the wrong good are in good company. Many share the struggle; the most famous and admirable is Jesus himself.

Wait -- Jesus, tempted to do the wrong good? Elnes gives us an interesting new insight into our Gospel reading today about Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. Have a look at the picture on the front of the bulletin. That’s “The Second Temptation” by English poet and painter William Blake. If I didn’t know the painting was of Jesus’ temptation, I’d never recognize the man on the left as the Adversary. Look at him, all healthy and buff – no horns, no tail, nothing to give us a clue. He looks more like Moses or Elijah.

Blake’s insight is one that I wouldn’t have thought of. Jesus wouldn’t be tempted by great evil any more than we would. In fact, if you wanted to tempt someone like Jesus, you’d want to convince him that you were on his side; you wouldn’t show up all dressed in red with a goatee and pitchfork. Your temptations would all have to be about doing good.

Look at the temptations again:

- Turning stones into bread
- Ruling the world
- Performing impressive miracles

They don’t sound terribly evil to me. If Jesus had based his ministry on turning rocks into bread, he could’ve fed everyone – everywhere! No evil there...

If Jesus ruled the world, think about it – he could tweak a law here or there, or redirect a few resources, or create world peace! No evil there...

And if Jesus would just perform one really big miracle like jumping off the roof of the temple and being caught up by legions of angels – imagine how many disciples he’d have had. Faith wouldn’t be an issue because the miracles would bring certainty.

The point is that none of these things would hurt anyone. Jesus did feed the hungry, he did change the political outlook, and he did perform miracles. But he didn’t devote his

whole ministry to just one of them. It's like the ring in *Lord of the Rings*: "...wielded by someone like Jesus these gifts might do enormous good for the world, but would ultimately enslave both the wielder and those he was trying to help."

There's a big difference between doing good, and doing the good that we're called to do. The Spirit doesn't call us to be good, but to be human, humble -- from the Latin, *humus* -- of the earth. This means finding our elemental waters, which are connected to God. We can and will do a lot of good walking the path that brings us most alive in the world, but we'll have to learn to say no to doing a lot of 'good' things.

Jesus path wasn't performing miracles, changing politics, or feeding the hungry. Those were just part of what Jesus was called to do. Jesus had a higher calling -- to live more fully into his humanity than anyone ever had before. By doing that, Jesus shows us how like Pinocchio we are in comparison -- how we're not our real selves.

When they talk about a "new creation" in 2 Corinthians, they're talking about surrendering to God's call by following the path of our greatest aliveness. The Kingdom of God is the place where our elemental waters live and we engage with life wholeheartedly.

In Jewish and Christian mythology, the adversary that tempted Jesus started out on God's side. Lucifer -- shining on, light bearer -- God's highest angel was right there with God, wanting to make the earth a wonderful place to live. Whether or not we believe in the literal existence of Satan, his origin story helps us make sense of the struggle, and the Dark Wood gift of temptation to do good. Elmes re-interprets the story of what happened between God and Satan.

The Adversary was convinced that God was overly optimistic His humans. Humans were supposed to live in harmony with God, but they had two flaws preventing it -- pride and shame. These flaws convince us that we're separated from God. We think we're smarter than God, or completely unworthy, so we think we have to create our own path through life. Following this path -- our comfortable rut -- keeps us from ever achieving the stature or majesty for which we were created. So, no matter how good humans were starting out, they would eventually devolve, becoming cruel and hateful, leading to strife, mayhem and warfare.

The adversary wanted peace and harmony as much as God did -- at first -- and was aware that if humans would let go of their pride and shame, God could set us on the path of our true identity. He also knew that most humans didn't have the will or the courage to follow this path, even if God showed it to them, because it led off the well-lit, well-traveled road, into a Dark Wood. And even though humans would always long for this path, they were convinced that either it was up to them to find their own way, or they were unworthy to follow it even if they found it.

Now, the Adversary wanted to guide the humans, but he wasn't in harmony with God anymore; he couldn't see in the Dark Wood any more than they could. So he made wide, bright roads and sidewalks that were easy to follow. By following these easy roads humans wouldn't devolve into chaos, but they could never become fully human.

But humans sensed that there were paths in the darkness leading to their true place in the world. Fear kept them from stepping out of the familiar to explore the woods. And because they constantly longed for these paths, they became unhappy, anxious, and belligerent.

Fearing that they might still fall into anarchy, and wanting to keep things decent and orderly, the Adversary set up taverns along the road where the humans could get cheap beer that mimicked the feeling of joy that comes from following our true path without being anywhere near it. Humans would make all sorts of promises and vows to follow their paths under the influence of the beer, but when morning came, it was too cold, or their heads ached from the night before. They would say, "I'll just have one or two until the weather clears, and then I'll go."

Some of the taverns took the form of churches. Religious leaders served a special brew of self-righteousness, convincing their flocks that the Dark Wood was evil. They persuaded them renounce their yearning to explore to follow a strict code of doctrine or burn for all eternity. Toe the line and be rewarded – no need to enter the darkness looking for some path that will only get you lost anyway. All the humans had to do was keep coming back to the tavern-churches and they would go to paradise when they died. That's how the Adversary turned himself into God, and God into the enemy.

But God had given humanity a powerful and dangerous gift. God planted this gift so far down in people's souls that it would only be accessible when people were living so far from their path that their humanity had worn down far enough to expose it. The gift was despair.

The danger was that some humans would break down and do more harm to themselves than good, especially if the Adversary caught on, so God did one more unexpected thing. Remember last week's quote from Blake? God created "a moment in each day which [the adversary] cannot find." A moment of grace that gave people a glimpse of what life could be if they lived free of the Adversary's interference.

With desperation setting in and cheap beer no longer working, many people wouldn't be content to stay in the taverns. In the moments when the Adversary lost sight of them, these humans might dare to venture out – into the howling wind and pouring rain. They'd find themselves on the edge of a Dark Wood where they could sense something mysterious calling.

Desperate enough to follow any path but the one they were on, some would stumble into the darkness lightning would crack across the sky, illuminating a path. Thunder would send reverberations of peace and joy through their bodies that some had never felt, and they would take a tentative step forward on the path revealed by the lightning.

Their path through the Dark Wood would rarely be clear or certain, but those who followed it would be certain that it was their path. And though the yearning and restlessness would never go away, life in the Dark Wood would evoke a sense of peace and joy that they had never experienced on the Adversary's well-marked and brightly lit roads – roads that might lead them to the next tavern, but the paths of the Dark Wood would lead them home.