

People vs. Power
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February 26, 2023 – Lent 1A
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-3; Matthew 4:1-11

When I was little, Sesame Street was required viewing at our house. One of the many lessons it imparted was how to resist doing something which looked good on the surface, but didn't have long term benefits. Cookie Monster, the big blue Muppet who has an affinity for cookies, was, and remains, one of the show's best teachers of those lessons. They nearly always involve Cookie trying not to eat something, and failing miserably at it. It's just who he is. He can no more resist devouring a whole plate of cookies than the humans who interact with him can sometimes resist grabbing onto their own deep desires. The readings appointed for today all speak to this reality, especially when it comes to human appetites for power and the need to feel like we're in control of our little corner of the world. Adam, Eve, the snake, and even the devil himself all discover that giving in to temptation does not end well, especially so when it comes to trying to exercise power in a way which is counter to God's purposes in the world. Their stories remind us that people often react to power in the same way as Cookie Monster does when he sees a cookie. We eat it heartily, and our desire for more tends to become the sole focus of our existence. That desire will do anything to get us to give into it, even to the point of convincing us it isn't so bad to do the one thing we were explicitly told not to.

Power, as a concept, is loosely defined as "the ability to act". Bishop Neil Alexander further defines worldly power as, "... the great resistant forces, largely uncontrollable, that hold people hostage, captive to the institutions and systems that

carry us along, the forces that drive the spirit of the age promising life but leading to death.”¹ In the Genesis reading, these forces are exactly what get the people into trouble. They have the power to decide for themselves whether to believe the snake’s claim that eating the fruit from a certain tree is just fine. The crafty snake goes out of his way to convince Eve that God’s prohibition on it is unreasonable. “Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?... You are not going to die” if you eat that (Gen 3:1, 4, JPS). It’s just going to give you more knowledge about the world. God’s commandment not to eat it seems soooo weird, doesn’t it? Eve’s response: *Well, it looks good to eat, and it’s supposed to make us wiser, so why not try it?*

In Matthew, this same kind of reasoning is what the devil uses against Jesus. Instead of trying to convince him that the consequences won’t be as bad as feared, the devil appeals to the notion that Jesus can “have it all” and rule the kingdom simply because of who he is. The devil tries it not once but three times: Come on, Jesus, show us what you’ve got. Turn these stones into bread. Trust God to catch you if you jump off this skyscraper. And best of all, you can have it all, for the low price of falling down and worshipping me.

Everything the snake and the devil himself offer up seem to deliver on the immediate promise life, while they in fact are a trap. Fruit is good, but what will actually happen if you do what you’ve been explicitly told not to? Making bread out of stones is a neat trick, but what happens when you run out of stones? You might trust that God will catch you if you jump off the top of a skyscraper, but that catch might well turn out to be the splat you make when you hit the ground. The hidden costs with all of these things

¹ The Rt. Rev. J. Neil Alexander, “Choose Life!” <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002ccd/view> [accessed February 23, 2023].

just don't seem to be worth it, especially if they involve sacrificing some piece of who we are. As enticing as the offers sound, this isn't the game show "Let's Make a Deal," where picking the wrong door doesn't really cost anything other than a good laugh at the "zonk" of a prize behind it. This is our actual life that's on the line – and so it really pays to stop and ask the question of whether they're really worth it.

That's not always so easy. Like the snake, our own desires have a tendency to gaslight us into doing what we know is wrong. And we do it anyway, because there's just a chance that the snake-like little voice which tells us to go ahead might actually be right. It's a narcissist in that way. Its only interest is in its own good and perpetuation, and without any consideration for anyone or anything in its way. It is also really good at manipulating us into believing that our use of it is always right and good, even in cases where nobody benefits except those who exercise it. Its only commitment is to domination by any means necessary, including violence. And anyone who gets in the way must be destroyed.²

In theological terms, THIS is sin. It separates us from God in its requirement for ignoring the welfare of others. Most of the time when we commit this kind of violation, we react like Adam and Eve did after they ate what they were told not to: we recognize our shame and try to hide from it. At some level, we know we've done something wrong – and sometimes it is less stressful for us personally in the short run to hide, rather than owning up to what we've done. As anyone who's ever been a kid who broke a rule, or parented a kid who broke a rule, knows, the "catch" in all of this is, it's much worse to be caught hiding than it is to be caught telling the truth. It's quite the moral dilemma to get

² Alexander, "Choose Life!"

stuck in: After I steal the cookies, do I pretend that I don't know anything about it, and risk being caught later? Or do I admit it right away and risk immediate punishment? Perhaps that is why we pray not to be led into temptation. Having something juicy dangled in front of us tends to cause problems at times – ones which are not easily solved by anything other than the tough, ancient practice of asking for forgiveness.

So what are we supposed to do about it?

I'm not sure we CAN do much. Temptation is just a part of what it is to be human. Where power is concerned, like most things, it's not inherently good or bad. It's what we DO with it that matters. Every day we are asked to do the same thing Jesus does in staring down the temptations involved with using what power we do have... and every day we have to make the decision to tell the devil to go away. Unfortunately, it is often an easier path to choose power, violence, and domination than it is to choose God's reconciling ways.³ It's a life-or-death struggle at times. Choosing life - telling the devil to go away and leave us alone, or resisting the temptation to eat all the cookies - isn't always the easiest way out, though it is the right way out.

³ Alexander, "Choose Life!"