

Temptation and Ukrainian Anniversary
Trinity Church Boston
Michael Battle
February 26, 2023
Psalm 32, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

I have learned that there are many kinds of weapons that can disarm an enemy—one, interestingly enough, is humor and the other is seldom understood—namely, desistence.

Weapon of Humor

So, first—the weapon of humor. Not that I am that gifted in humor, but I imprinted on a master who used humor to disarm a corrupt government. I lived and worked with Archbishop Desmond Tutu whose humor was a sign of his spiritual resilience. For example, Tutu told jokes like the following about his relationship with one of the masters of apartheid, the last prime minister of South Africa—P.W. Botha. The story goes like this for Tutu telling this in the third person:

Tutu and Botha came together for a meeting. They didn't want anybody to hear what they were saying to each other. So, they met in a small boat in the middle of a lake. Suddenly a wind blew Botha's hat into the water.

Tutu said, 'Don't worry, I'll get it' — and he stepped over the side of the boat. To everyone's surprise, he just walked across the water to fetch Botha's hat.

The TV and newspaper people watched this miracle from the side of the lake. But the next day, the newspaper headlines read: 'Tutu kan nie swem nie' (Tutu can't swim).

The joke is a good example of how South African media naturally twisted perception to show an inept Tutu, no matter what good he may have facilitated. It seems strange where we find this weapon of humor. It is even in the Bible. Even the psalmist quotes some hyperbolic Jewish humor. "Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you."

We often overlook humor because it is surprising to find it in tragedy and suffering. Of course, Christians project ultimate tragedy and suffering on Jesus, and yet Jesus often uses humor to illumine moral and spiritual points; for example in Luke 6.42, Jesus no doubt made people around him laugh when he said, "how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

Such humor reminds me of Ukrainian resilience that inspires many around the world to gather this weekend to mark the anniversary of Russia's invasion and for us to demonstrate our solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

Weapon of Desistence

The other surprising weapon that can disarm an enemy, is desistence. What do I mean? In short desistence seeks to prevent a particular act from ever occurring again. So, for example, most of us know the phrase: cease and desist. These two terms in a lawyer's letter describe what the person receiving such a letter must do. To cease something is to stop a particular activity. To desist something is to not do that activity ever again in the future. So, my 17-year-old son who is a singer/songwriter loves to compose his music, stream of consciously, playing his electric guitar at its highest volume in our apartment where we live in New York City at General Theological Seminary. I got an email that he must desist from such activity. (If you know my son, however, you would discover his own counteractive desistence).

We see this practice of desistence in our Gospel lesson today.

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Here, Jesus desists evil's attempt to treat God's ultimate nourishment, love, as a parlor trick, and such smoke and mirrors must never be practiced again. Anyone or anything other than God, who claims ultimate meaning or existence, must be revealed for its deception once and for all. In short, Jesus desists addictions disguised as nourishment. Jesus desists so-called ultimate power claimed by anyone other than God.

Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city and placed Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple. (This is interesting imagery, by the way, in that the devil seemingly has power to place Jesus where it wants Jesus to be). The devil said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to the devil, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Here, Jesus desists the devil's virtual reality, and no doubt aggravates the devil, by reminding the devil it is not God and never will be. This is one of the most important temptations because in Jesus' resistance to be superman, Jesus desists delusional religion that many dysfunctional leaders eat up: hook, line and sinker. Jesus knows the devil may have the power to place Jesus in particular places, but such power is more akin to holographic projections. Those places the devil projects are not real; rather they are the tricked up pretense of power to get others to drink the cool aid that fear is good, and the fundamental reality of existence is violence. So, the devil puts a VR headset on Jesus, and the devil puts one on itself and sits back expecting Jesus to buy into ultimate reality as fundamentally a violent game. In effect, the devil wants to play Xbox games with Jesus; it wants to pretend to be superman and wonder woman with Jesus. But Jesus desists this delusional religion.

Lastly, the devil, realizing the tricked up world is not working with Jesus, took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and the devil said to Jesus, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Ta ta—here is the punch line. This is what the devil was ultimately after. The devil exposed itself. Jesus desists evil by saying to it: Get out of here, Satan! for it is written, Worship and serve the Lord your God. Here the devil is exorcised, removed from Jesus.

In this final exorcism, Jesus desists megalomania, that tendency to colonize, dominate, and enslave others. Megalomania is a disease with symptoms of those who try to be dictators and rulers, not only of human bodies but also of human hearts, minds and souls. Instead of giving in to megalomania, Jesus offers a different way to be as he teaches his disciples to desist megalomania with the golden rule to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10.27). This golden rule drove the devil crazy—drove it away and drives dysfunctional leaders away who seek to replace God with themselves.

In this season of lent we face the onslaught of megalomania. To me, this is why temptation scares us so!

A couple had two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were excessively mischievous. They were always getting into trouble and their parents knew that, if any mischief occurred in their town, their sons were probably involved.

The boys' mother heard that an Episcopal priest in town had been successful in disciplining children, so she asked if the priest would speak with her boys. The priest agreed but asked to see them individually. So, the mother sent her 8-year-old first, in the morning, with the older boy to see the priest in the afternoon.

The priest, a dynamic woman with a booming voice, sat the younger boy down and asked him sternly, "Where is God?"

The boy's mouth dropped open, but he made no response, sitting there with his mouth hanging open, wide-eyed. So, the priest repeated the question in an even sterner tone, "Where is God!?" Again, the boy made no attempt to answer.

So, the priest raised her voice even more and shook her finger in the boy's face and bellowed, "WHERE IS GOD!?"

The boy screamed and bolted from the room, ran directly home and dove into his closet, slamming the door behind him. When his older brother found him in the closet, he asked, "What happened?"

The younger brother, gasping for breath, replied, "We are in BIG trouble this time, dude. God is missing - and they think WE did it!"

The humor in the story of naughty brothers is in the naivete of thinking someone could kidnap God. Perhaps, however, it is not so humorous when we think of those who kill, abuse, belittle, and try to strip away the image of God in other people; and yet at the same time cannot explain why they are doing these things even though they know they shouldn't do them. This is evil.

To desist evil, let us be in solidarity around the world, let us join in Ukrainian desistance to this evil. As this weekend marks the anniversary of Russia's invasion, may it stop and never happen again. Let us consciously demonstrate our solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We learn from Jesus that God desires desistance to be obvious, conscious and out in the open. Injustice toward Ukraine is a threat to justice around the world. That's why God became incarnate in Jesus to desist evil and injustice in our world. If we want to join God's desistance, we must know what makes God laugh and cry. As Christians we say we know these things through Jesus' behavior. If we believe this, then let us practice this faith.

(end?)

Our work this Lent is to understand how God's presence is indeed our refuge—**love is not a trick**. God's love neither glitters nor fades. God's love always makes more of us and resists any temptation toward destruction. God's love, believe it or not, is the focal point for Jesus in the forty days of lent. It should be our conscious vision as well. The temptation is always to become less than who we are made to be. Jesus mitigates these tendencies with his kind of desistance to stop evil once and for all.