

It is tempting to think about temptation as something that comes from outside of us, something placed on our path by some “other”, a devil if you will. When we can focus on the devil without, we are able to ignore the temptation within.

It has been theorized that all temptations takes one of three forms: the need to be secure, the need to be esteemed, and the need to control.

Control. I think I’ve finally given up the illusion that I am in control here at St. Thomas’. It took awhile, but you wore me down. Thank you.

I had to look deep inside myself to understand why I felt I needed to control the trajectory of where we were going, making sure that we had enough money to do what we want to do here, making sure every ministry here is successful.....

Part of it, to be sure, was because I care deeply for all of you and this place, but part of it is because I was taught

- Have a written plan
- Work your plan
- Keep track of everything and manage the numbers

Sound familiar? But what came harder for me—perhaps for you, too?—is the understanding that while I can influence the outcome of something, I can’t control it.

I guess that’s the difference between being a leader, and being a dictator. But as much as we would like to believe ***we are in control***, we are never fully in control. Not in this life.

We can claim that it’s what’s happening all around – outside us-- that make us want to take control—but if we could only pause and reflect—we might see that we are jumping in so that everyone can see that we can control that the job gets done right, which will bring us the esteem of our colleagues, and secures our place in the community.

In other words: the temptation to control, garner esteem and security may appear to be happening TO us, but they are really happening WITHIN us.

“You’re hungry, Jesus—just turn this stone into bread. You can--you know you have the power to do this. So do it. Take charge with the power you have.”

And anyone who pulls our strings—deliberately—whether it’s Satan or perhaps someone at work or in our family-- would rather we **react** to their words or actions than **reflect**. Then it’s so much easier to control *us*.

Jesus understood that trap. He saw the destructiveness of the temptations he was offered, but-- more important-- he understood the underlying incentives that made them so enticing: he knew he really could turn stones into bread. He really could fall from a great height safely. It’s soooo tempting to be able to show people how very much in control of the situation we are. But we’re not.

If you don’t believe me-- try doing something unexpected in front of your friends and family. Try taking a stand for miracle whip in a room full of mayonnaise fanatics. You know what I mean. How in control can we really be when we are constantly monitoring what we say and do for fear that people won’t like it. Our being in control-- is an illusion.

And so we come to esteem.

We will never be esteemed by everyone. No one in this world has ever been esteemed or loved by everyone. Even Jesus was unpopular with a great many people. Though we will never be universally loved, we *can* work at being universally loving. Being esteemed by all is a pipe dream.

And lastly—we have our need for security. That’s a tricky one.

A real sense of security became a thing of the past when we deployed the atom bomb in WWII. Many people thought we would never be safe from weapons again. And perhaps they’re right.

All of us have probably had someone in our lives-- if not us ourselves -- become suddenly injured or sick. That's when we find out how precarious our life can be.

Or—many of us would give our right arm to be secure financially. The big joke is that all of us are only one major illness away from bankruptcy. Except it's no joke. Really, we are only as secure as our next paycheck.

So-- security is also an illusion.

Here's where we look to Jesus. Jesus knew that life wasn't secure. That our lives are not without risk. After all---even his life was not without risk.

One of the great paradoxes of our faith is that Jesus didn't come to give us control, esteem or security, but to set us free. And that's quite a different thing.

So the next time those demons come to badger us, first--we need to pause and look inside ourselves to see why they are so persistently attractive.

Then, we can try and see them for what they are—illusions that are trying to keep us in our prisons of need.

But we can't be prisoners if we know we are free.

Between the stimulus of temptations and how we respond to it—there will a space. Take it. In that space is our power to choose our response. God will be there in that space. We can either choose the illusion of our false temptations, or we can choose the freedom that God offers us. May we all choose well. Amen.