

Where the Sidewalk Ends
Sunday, March 6, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Listen to the Mustn'ts, child, listen to the Don'ts.

Listen to the Shouldn'ts, the Impossible, the Won'ts.

Listen to the Never Haves, then listen close to me.

Anything can happen, child, Anything can be.ⁱ

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What are your Mustn'ts, your Shouldn'ts and your Don'ts?

What are the desires that you feel compelled to resist?

What craving grips your body that you feel you aren't supposed to satisfy?

What longing fills you more with shame than joy?

What indulgence, action or behavior do you fear judgment ... or perhaps judge yourself ... for partaking in or even desiring ... so you hide it, don't speak of it, pray that nobody ever finds out.

Don't worry .. I'm not going to ask you to share.

The point is ... we all have them. Every one of us can answer those questions with something.

Every one of us has our own personal checklist of Mustn'ts, Shouldn'ts, and Don'ts that we occasionally or maybe continually fight the urge to indulge.

And when they present themselves, often it feels like a cage match ... one against one ... us against them. One will win ... and one will lose.

That's the nature of temptation.

Or at least that's what we've been taught to believe.

Anything can be a temptation. We can have temptations about food and sex, drugs and money. Temptations about speaking up or keeping silent. About relationship with friends and family or with our electronic devices.

We can have temptations about diving in quickly or putting things off. Temptations about fear and anxiety ... and temptations about walling ourselves off from that which makes us feel anything at all.

The common threads that run through how we are taught to see all temptation is that they are something bad and they are something it us up to us to resist. The cartoon angel and devil

on each shoulder trying to sway us either way with our own will and power of resistance all that stands between us and all our Mustn'ts, Shouldn'ts, and Don'ts.

At least if our temptations rise to the level where we begin to consider them addictions, there is hope for help in the recognition of a truth – that we are not meant to struggle alone. That we need community to live the healthiest, holiest lives.

At least if our temptations rise to the level of addiction, there is an acknowledgment that the whole idea of “if you just tried harder” is fundamentally flawed, and “just say no” is a double setup. First, often it doesn't work ... and second, it makes us feel like we are perpetually trapped in a losing struggle and feel like terrible failures when we “give in.”

If only I had been stronger.

If only I were better.

If only I weren't so weak.

“Next time,” we say.

“Next time I'll try harder.”

Or sometimes the struggle just feels too futile, and we shift our energy from resisting temptation to just trying to make sure nobody else finds out.

And the church has not been helpful.

For nearly 2,000 years, the church has perpetuated a culture of selective purity and shame around temptation. Selective in both what was labeled as temptation that must be resisted and who was expected to do the resisting.

Girls and women are not supposed to have or act on sexual desire, and yet if boys or men act on theirs, it is not our fault but because the women dressed or acted in a way that was too tempting. So, women become responsible not only for their own resistance to temptation but for men's as well.

Pretty convenient for men!

The Church even created our own temptation industrial complex ... a whole system of power and control designed to use the idea of temptation and our continual inability to resist it by ourselves to keep people in line. To keep people conveniently perpetually in need of a forgiveness that only the church can provide ... with the fate of our immortal souls hanging in the balance.

Pretty convenient for the Church!

And passages like the Gospel reading we just heard have been used for centuries to support this deeply distorted idea of temptation and sin as an individual struggle of personal will and worthiness.

We are so messed up about temptation ... and we read this passage through that distorted lens. A reading that casts Jesus as some sort of first-century superman, singlehandedly battling and defeating temptation. And that is our model to emulate. With our worthiness and acceptability dependent on the outcome.

And if you think that's not true ... look at the words to the hymn we just sang!

Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted and yet undefiled

Then if Satan on us press
Jesus, Savior, hear our call
Victor in the wilderness
Grant we may not faint nor fall.

It is us against temptation, we are told. And sure, we ask Jesus to help us but if we give into temptation, does Jesus get tagged with that? Oh no, that's all us.

It's like George Carlin used to say, "you never hear an athlete say after the game, 'Things were going great until Jesus made me fumble!'"

No, we are told that when it comes to temptation. we are on our own. That we are to take what church and sometimes society tells us is temptation as Gospel without question or context ... and our only job is to do all we can to resist .. or at least hope nobody finds out if we don't.

Now, clearly there are a multitude of problems with this approach ... and I want to focus on two of them. And each has a question we need to ask instead.

First of all, some of what we consider temptations are not bad things at all ... they just go against cultural belief and practice. This is an area where huge damage has been and continues to be done ... as anyone who has been through the abuse of LGBTQ so-called conversion therapy can painfully attest.

A Jesus whose call for us is to love God, one another and ourselves invites us not to some rigid, culturally-conditioned and ultimately heterosexually, patriarchally and binarily biased sexual ethic but simply to ask the question:

"Does this expression of sexuality contribute to a life of love and joy?"

“A life where we, God and each other are celebrated, honored and enjoyed?”

A Jesus whose call for us is to love God, one another and ourselves calls us continually to challenge the underlying assumptions for everything that is labeled as a temptation to be resisted. Asking whether this really is a temptation we need to try to resist ... or is this really something that is just fine that upholds a system of power that needs to be overthrown?

For example, in a recent survey, two of the top five temptations listed by Americans were procrastination and laziness.

A Jesus who says we are not what we produce. A Jesus who says life is to be lived in holy, healthy ways is a Jesus who begs us to ask the question “are these really temptations to be resisted ... or are these actually holy, healthy behaviors – reactions to something unhealthy – that themselves only look unhealthy in the context of a system that screams in our ear

Work it, make it better
Do it faster makes us stronger
More than ever hour after hour
Work is never over.ⁱⁱ

And that’s not all.

We tend to look at temptations as weaknesses and vices – and our susceptibility to them as something wrong with us. Yet so often temptations are not signs of our unworthiness or failing but of wounds we carry in need of healing, aching holes in our lives that not only desperately need to be filled but deserve to be filled.

It is the excessive drinking that medicates pain and depression.

The disordered eating that springs from body shaming and diet culture.

The affair or porn addiction that has beneath it deep loneliness or a history of abuse.

The gossiping that masks insecurity from a past of untrustworthy relationships that have created a low self-image.

So, some temptations may be so culturally conditioned that they need to be named as not temptations to something bad at all.

Others truly are harmful to ourselves and others ... and .. they are still not referenda on who we are and our worthiness and lovability. They are signs of a deeper hunger that can be sated, a deeper bondage from which we can be free.

And our task – together ... always together ... is to attend to them so we can get to the wound that really needs to be treated, the hole in our heart that really needs to be filled. To see temptation as a teacher, and remember, as Shel Silverstein sings, to

Listen to the Mustn'ts, child, listen to the Don'ts.
 Listen to the Shouldn'ts, the Impossible the Won'ts.
 Listen to the Never Haves, then listen close to me.
 Anything can happen, child, Anything can be.

Just trying to resist these temptations – particularly by ourselves -- without seeking healing for the wounds is a losing battle and a recipe for misery. We are bound at best ... or sometimes at worst .. merely to shift the behavior to something else because the wound will still be there, screaming for attention and care.

And ... none of this is what Jesus' time in the desert was about. Yet we continue to frame this story in terms of some heroic personal battle with the devil on our shoulder because the church has long been more interested in upholding the economic and personal narratives of self-sufficient individualism and a works righteousness that equates purity with lovability than truly looking at the revolutionary nature of the world Jesus is inviting us into in this story.

Jesus enters the desert newly anointed as God's beloved. John had called him *Christos*, the Messiah ... and so the expectation of the people was that he was a spiritual, political and military leader who would deliver them from their oppressors. That now was the time. They had waited so long for freedom and now was the time. And the people wanted action ... right now.

But instead of giving Jesus a three-point plan and launching the insurgency, God's Spirit led Jesus into the desert where he just ... sat there.

And when the devil finally showed up, notice what his temptations were.

Feed yourself and your people.

Claim the power to free your people and rule them with justice.

Know once and for all that God is real and powerful.

None of these are bad things. In, fact all of these are good things.

So, what's the temptation?

The temptation is the immediacy.

The temptation is the quick fix.

The temptation is that every one of these things:

Creating a life of sustainability for ourselves and the world.

Overthrowing oppression and building a beloved community of justice and love.

Growing a relationship of deep knowledge, trust and love with God.

Every one of these things takes time. Lots of time.

The people were waiting for a Messiah who would change everything RIGHT NOW. Only that's not how change happens. However, that is what enslavement looks like. Enslavement is about

Work it, make it better

Do it faster makes us stronger

More than ever hour after hour

Work is never over.

Liberation ... the very thing the revolutionary Jesus comes to give us ... is about a life that honors Sabbath. The life of take the time to breathe. The life of you are more than what you can produce. The life of the long, slow, work of healing. The long, slow, work of love.

It's no wonder we have read this wrong for so long. Because if temptation is about taking the culture's word for what is right and what is wrong. If temptation is about ignoring our wounds, closeting our desires and just keep going, just keep trying harder ... the system of enslavement in which we are all trapped and which the church has learned not to transform but to mimic remains unchallenged.

It's hard. So many of us are trapped in systems that not only tell us our livelihood is wrapped up in producing as much as quickly as possible but our worthiness and lovability too!

And even when we exit those systems, the first question people ask is "what are you doing to DO in your retirement?" It's hard. We cannot do it alone. We can only do it together. That is the witness we have as the church.

And it is a revolutionary witness. It is the witness of liberation. Because if we stop. If we take time in the wilderness to breathe, and to let the breath of God flow through us.

If we listen to the Mustn'ts and the Don'ts, the Shouldn'ts, the Impossibles, and the Won'ts. ... and let them lead us to questioning our assumptions and discovering our wounds.

And then if we take the time to shift our assumptions and judgments, take the time to find and tend our wounds and the wounds of each other.

If we take the time to build long-term, strategic campaigns that will cast down the mighty from their seats and lift up those who have been trampled down and cast aside.

If we take the time to forge deep bonds of trust, healing and love with God, ourselves and one another.

If we can remember what we used to know, if we were privileged to have lives of safety when we were little -- that it doesn't have to be this way.

That being is enough before we even get to doing. That we can slow down, and have our skinned knees kissed, and dream as we look at clouds, and find love and safety in a long embrace.

If we can remember, or if we can't remember, at least help one another to trust we will discover that there is another place to live. A place where the tyranny of immediacy is broken and the invitation of "what happened to you" replaces the accusation of "what's wrong with you?"

That there is a place where the sidewalk ends
 And before the street begins
 And there the grass grows soft and white
 And there the sun burns crimson bright
 And there the moon-bird rests from his flight
 To cool in the peppermint wind.

Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
 And the dark street winds and bends
 Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow
 We shall walk with a walk that is measured and slow
 And watch where the chalk-white arrows go
 To the place where the sidewalk ends

Yes we will walk with a walk that is measured and slow
 And we'll go where the chalk-white arrows go
 For the children, they mark, and the children, they know
 The place where the sidewalk ends.ⁱⁱⁱ
 Amen.

ⁱ Listen to the Mustn'ts -- *Silverstein, Shel. Where the Sidewalk Ends: the Poems & Drawings of Shel Silverstein. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.*

ⁱⁱ "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger" by Daft Punk (<https://youtu.be/yydNF8tuVmU>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Where the Sidewalk Ends -- *Silverstein, Shel. Where the Sidewalk Ends : the Poems & Drawings of Shel Silverstein. New York :HarperCollins, 2004.*