

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” We pray these words every week during the Lord’s Prayer. For most of us, the word “temptation” is synonymous with “evil” or at the very least something bad. Yet most of us are not tempted to do truly evil things. One of the greatest temptations we will experience over and over in life, is the temptation to do good. This may sound counterintuitive at first. Isn’t doing “good” a good thing? Of course it is. But doing the *wrong good* can lead us away from living our most wholehearted life. In his book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Eric Elnes defines the “wrong good” as “any work that is not yours to do.” He says “it may be *someone else’s* good to do, but not your own.”<sup>1</sup>

The temptation to do the wrong good can show up in different ways. From the daily decisions of how we spend our time, energy and resources, to life-altering decisions like discerning a career path. Elnes writes, “the temptation to do the wrong good is one of the greatest gifts you can receive, as it continually challenges you to discern between the good you are called to do and the good you are specifically *not called* to do.” (Elnes, 108) Elnes also asserts that the gift of temptation is important because it produces results like exhaustion and burnout that indicate if the good we are doing is central to becoming who we are called to be or if it is a detour from that path.

Figuring out which path we are meant to travel, which good we are meant to do, is the key to finding meaning and purpose in our lives. Finding one’s calling is bigger than determining a career path although, the best occupations are those that provide an outlet through which we live out part of our calling. But jobs come to an end and while we do have them, they are not the only thing we do with our time. At least I hope not. Most of us also won’t continue to hold a job until we breathe our last breath. Hopefully we will all have many years of life on this earth after our occupations come to end. That doesn’t mean that one’s calling in life is also over. Our occupations are not the same as

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<sup>1</sup> Elnes, E. (2015). *Gifs of the Dark Wood*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 104.

our calling in life. We have purpose far beyond what we do for a paycheck. Figuring out what that purpose is, well, that is where things get foggy.

There are all sorts of tools for choosing a career or a college major. Aptitude tests, personality inventories, self-help books, and career counselors will all help you determine what you are best suited for. But there is a difference between discovering what you might be good at and discerning how you are called. If I had followed the career assessment result I received after being laid off in 2009, I would be working as a funeral director. A career as a funeral director is something I would be good at – it combined my aptitude for empathy and my desire to serve people with my history and aptitude for business. But when I paid attention to what I discerned to be the nudges of the Spirit, I knew that I was called to church ministry.

Elnes points out that we are in good company when it comes to being tempted to do the wrong good. We heard the story this morning of Jesus being tempted by the devil or in Hebrew “The Adversary”. The temptations presented to Jesus were not acts of evil or even really inherently bad. Turning stones into bread to end the hunger of the world. Performing an incredible miracle such as jumping off the Temple roof and being saved by angels would go a long way to making believers out anyone who witnessed it. With the political power of ruling all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus could end corruption and oppression and truly bring the kingdom of God on earth. These are all potentially good things and none of them would cause pain or any sort of harm to anyone. But they were not the good Jesus was called to do. Jesus’ ministry did include all of these – feeding the hungry, working to change the political landscape, and performing miracles – but his calling was greater than any of these individual good things. By resisting the temptation to focus on one or even all three of these acts, Jesus was able to follow his best path. A path that continues to reveal God’s immense and abundant love and grace for all of creation, and our call to live out that love and grace in this time and place.

The temptation to do the wrong good is not only something that plagues individuals, but is also prevalent in faith communities. There are an overwhelming

number of ways a faith community can do good in the immediate community and the world and it can be overwhelming to discern where to put our energy and resources. My home church in Woodinville, Washington experienced this in a very specific way. For years the church had partnered with an organization called Mary's Place in downtown Seattle, a homeless shelter for women and children about 45 minutes away from the church. Once a month or so we would prepare a meal and serve it to the 40 or 50 individuals at the shelter. After many years, the person who had served as the coordinator was no longer able to do so. It became more and more difficult to find volunteers to sign up for the meals and no one wanted to be in charge. Every time it was our church's turn to prepare and serve a meal, it felt like pulling teeth to get enough people to volunteer. The program was draining our energy as a church and distracting us from doing the good work we were meant to do instead. After some prayerful discernment, our justice and mission team made the difficult decision to stop doing this good work. It was no longer ours to do. We were able to instead focus on doing good that energized the congregation and felt like it was more central to our calling as a community like working to bring marriage equality to Washington state and support the homeless population in our own neighborhood.

The temptation to do the wrong good in faith communities may show up in the choices we make around service or mission work, but it can also show up in the way we do church itself. How we worship, what programs we offer, how our governance is structured, what and how we teach our young people, and how we spend our money. Each of these parts of being a faith community have the potential to lead us down a path of wholeheartedness and aliveness or to tempt us down a path we are not called to travel. We often do a particular good because we have always done it or because we think we "should". We get into a routine that is familiar and comfortable. It feels safe. It may have been a good that we were called to do at the time but we have overstayed our time on that particular path. Or it may be a good we never called to do in the first place, but we have been doing it for so long, we can't imagine traveling a different way.

Whether as a community or as individuals, God has placed yearnings within us that beckon us toward our greatest aliveness. Toward a place where we live life wholeheartedly. Frederick Buechner is quoted as saying “The place God calls you to, is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>2</sup> May each of us individually and collectively resist the temptation to do the good that is not ours to do. May we patiently and quietly wait for the nudgings of the Spirit, and may we have the courage to follow a path that may not be well lit, but which will lead us to that intersection of our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger.

### Time of Reflection

Each week we are taking time to reflect, accompanied by music. This week, you have a finger labyrinth on the back of your bulletin.

<http://www.pattonhq.com/links/uccministry/cretan.pdf>

Labyrinths are an ancient Christian practice that was designed for an experience of pilgrimage. You are invited to *slowly* follow the path with your finger, around the circuits to the center and back out again. Repeat this journey to the center and back as many times as you wish during this time. As you do so, invite God to join you on this journey. Open yourself to listening for the intuition, the small voice, inside of you nudging you in the path that brings your life the most fullness.

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<sup>2</sup> Buechner, Frederick (1993). *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*: Harper One