

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "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.'" ⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 4:1-11

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"Gibbs' Rule #36: If You Feel Like You're Being Played, You Probably Are"

Rev. Amy Terhune

I'm going to have to tell a little story here on Bryan today. I love that he lets me do that. But first a bit of background – in case you don't know, your internet talks to itself. For example, if I go on google and look at refrigerators, and then go over to Facebook, odds are that refrigerator ads will show up in my Facebook feed. I don't know how Facebook knows what I'm looking at on google, but they talk to each other. But not just google and Facebook. All kinds of things talk to each other. So I'm on Paramount Plus watching NCIS, which has become my new favorite show since the pandemic. NCIS stands for Navel Criminal Investigative Service, and it's a murder mystery show with Navy Cops. I like it because it's got a good mix of humor in there. The characters are quirky enough that they make me laugh while they're solving murders. Until just this fall, the main character was a no-nonsense, hard-nose marine named Leroy Jethro Gibbs, portrayed by Mark Harmon. Gibbs has centered the show for 20 seasons, and one of his quirks is that he has rules. Over 20 seasons, they've revealed probably 40 or 50 of Gibbs' rules. He's also burned a couple of them. If you want to see all Gibbs' Rules, I posted a montage of them on our church Youtube Page. The link is in your bulletin and on the website homepage.

But I digress... Now, because Paramount Plus, Amazon, and Facebook all talk to each other, there I am, scrolling around on Facebook last fall, when what should pop up in my feed but a bunch of Amazon products, one of which was a sign that had all of Gibbs' rules on it. I said to myself: "Wow, that is so stupid! I have to get it!" Which I did. And it was delivered here, because here is usually where I am. Dina and Bryan happened to be in the office when I opened up this stupid sign and let out of squeal of delight.

"Oh boy, it's Gibbs' Rules!"

At which point, Bryan (clearly NOT an NCIS fan) turns to Dina and says, in all seriousness, "She had rules printed up for Gibbs Hall? Have people been that disrespectful?"

Okay, sure. Never put suspects together. Always wear gloves at a crime scene. Never go anywhere without a knife. If these are the new rules for Gibbs Hall, what do they say about our

dinners? But in all seriousness, I am NOT going to preach on NCIS every week, but I am going to show a brief clip like I did today, and use the rule as a launch point for the sermon. If you want to play a fun game this year, watch the montage, and then try to figure out which rule I'm going to use each week.

The rule today is #36: If you feel like you're being played, you probably are. The urban dictionary defines "being played" as a practice whereby someone knowingly uses or manipulates your emotions in order to get something out of you. It happens all the time. That person you like flirts a little in order to get you to pay for dinner. Your boss heaps up compliments and writes you a good review a week before they drop a big tedious job on your desk. A loved one reminds you of how you dropped the ball before asking you to help with something you really don't want to do. Our own affection, ego and guilt can all be tools of manipulation in the hands of another. This is not to say that there aren't times when we do things we don't want to do because we care about someone else. But most of us, with time and experience, can tell when we're being played.

Jesus certainly could. Now our scripture today calls it temptation, which our society tends to link to behavior. We're tempted to have another piece of chocolate cake. We're tempted to look at websites we shouldn't. We're tempted to skim a little cash of the till. I read an interesting tidbit from Lee Griess, who writes, "Did you know that in 1987, eight million children disappeared in the United States? However, not one of them was abducted. Not one of them was kidnapped or harmed. No. Rather, in the year 1987, the Internal Revenue Service first began to require proof that children claimed as dependents actually existed. Beginning in 1987, Social Security numbers for dependents were required on tax returns when dependents were claimed. And suddenly, eight million children disappeared in America. [from "Strong in God's Name" by Lee Griess, www.Sermons.com.] I guess the IRS felt like it was being played.

But if you dig into scripture, temptation is really more about the pull to be someone we're not called to be. The behaviors are merely symptoms of deeper identity issues related to flawed physical, emotional or moral health; identity issues that subtly devalue human life and agency, be it our own or someone else's. Another has defined temptation as the pull to fill legitimate needs through illegitimate means, which, if you really think about that, gets back to identity and character as well.

Every Lent, without fail, we start in the desert with Jesus, facing temptation and human frailty. He's just been baptized. He's probably felt a call on his life for some time, and he at last responds, accepts it, goes all in, so to speak. He descends into the water and arises to take up the mantle of the calling on his life. Which is a big deal. And on the heels of that high, he suddenly faces some real doubts, fears, questions, identity issues that he's got to confront and wrestle through if he's going to move forward. Too many of us hope that the story of Jesus' temptation is somehow an allegory or a metaphor. Surely Jesus wasn't really tempted. Surely the closer we get to him, the less we'll be tempted. But that's not how the scriptures tell it, which is disconcerting, because if even Jesus was tempted, there's really no escape, no avoiding it, no getting out of it for the rest of us.

So how comes the temptation, you ask? Bill Ritter writes, "It comes as a force....a power....a yearning that is all but overwhelming. Does it come from beyond him? Yes. Does it come from within him? Yes. I mean, when it gets really down and dirty in your life....I am talking about that wrestling match that takes place between your better self and your lesser self....you tell me how temptation comes to you. Then I'll tell you how it came to Jesus.

"There are three temptations. You've heard them before. The first invites Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus was hungry...."famished," says the scripture. Real hunger is not a momentary tickle in the stomach that leads one to say: "Well, it's getting along towards supper time." Real hunger...well, I don't know what real hunger is, never having felt it. But having toyed with any number of diets over

any number of years, I know the power that food has over me. Or as some have said: "better to die from havin' it than die from wantin' it."

"But this isn't about diet. This is about survival. And you know Jesus thought about it. After all, you can't heal others when your own body is weak. But in the end, unwilling to let survival call the tune for his life, Jesus declined the offer.

Leading to the second temptation: "If you are really who you say you are, prove it by jumping from way up here to way down there." Surely God will suspend the laws of gravity for you....turn the ground into a giant sofa pillow for you....outfit a team of angels with catcher's gloves for you. And you know Jesus thought about it. That kind of show could really inspire and rally the troops. But knowing that show isn't substance, and feeling no need to prove his identity with sensationalism or heroism, Jesus said: "I'll pass." [4 ¶s from, "Until A More Opportune Time" by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

Which leads to the third. "Worship me, and I'll give you the world," says the devil. About this, Henri Nouwen wrote, "What makes this temptation so alluring is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. [from Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1998) pg. 77.] This is the old temptation to let ends justify means. And Jesus was not without awareness that Power has its perks. But when push came to shove, Jesus chose the power of love over the love of power.

When it came down to who Jesus was going to be in the world, he grappled with that. And the tempter tried to play him. "if you're the Son of God...?" Did you catch that? IF... Satan says it twice, calling into question Jesus' relationship to God. But Jesus recognized that he was being played, manipulated, used. And every time, Jesus came back to God. God was his identity marker, his soul's orientation, his deepest hunger. What kind of man will I be? Self-made or spirit-fed? What kind of leader will I be? Showstopper or Kingdom-builder? What kind of savior will I be? Military hero or suffering servant? Jesus made a choice. He made a decision to live into who God was calling him to be.

One of the kids recently pointed out to me that evil is live spelled backwards. That makes you think, doesn't it? Evil is what reverses life, kills it, robs it of meaning, makes it shallow. The saddest thing we humans do is we play ourselves – we tell ourselves all those excuses that chip away at our calling, that allow us to use and manipulate our own emotions so that we don't have to face the hard work of love. I have to put me first, because no one else will. I have to take care of my own first. I can handle this. One time won't hurt. One bad habit isn't so bad, especially compared to them over there. I can speak hurtful words if I'm standing on principle. Some evils are necessary to stop bigger evils. These are lies we tell ourselves and each other. Temptations that keep us from holding ourselves and others accountable to Christ's vision of a loving, grace-filled, just world for all people.

If you feel like you're being played, your probably are. Jesus knew it, recognized it, wrestled through it, and came out on the other side ready to love enemies, heal the marginalized, serve the poor, and die for my sin. Which means he understands all too well what you and I face. Yet Jesus never forgot who he was—God's son. And it gave him the means to resist the devil's attempts to play him. The same is true for us. This Lent, the least we should do is get real with ourselves; look at what tempts us and find ways to set boundaries, train ourselves in new habits, and find legitimate ways to fill real needs. No matter what anyone else tries to tell you, evil and sin don't own you. We fail, but we are not failures. We fall, but we are not fallen. We sin but we are not worthless. You are God's precious and beloved child. That is our most basic identity—it's who we are—every last one of us. You are loved, and that divine, unconditional, all-encompassing love is power in your spirit. That love is

what tempts us away from sin and worldly allure. That love is what draws us into the deep places of God's presence. That love is what gives us the strength and the courage to refuse what is less in order to live into all that God calls us to be. That love is what fuels our dreams, sustains our courage, and empowers us to redefine what's possible.

Long ago, when Jesus was dying, the temple leaders taunted Jesus with words that by then may have sounded all too familiar. "IF...you are the son of God, come down from that cross and save yourself." Regardless of whose mouth it came from, Jesus had learned to recognize that voice. He knew when he was being played, and he did not heed it. He was the Son of God. We are gathered here today because Jesus remembered who he was. He did not come down from that cross and save himself. He stayed on it, and saved all of us instead. Which should give us hope. Tell me about the fears you face, the lies you tell yourself, the doubts that leave you questioning who you are in God's plans, and I'll tell you about a savior who dealt with the same things, who found a way beyond them, and who, by the power of love this Lent, spurs us to rise above them too. Thanks be to God. Amen.