

The Choices We Make, The Regrets We Carry

Luke 4:1-13

It's been about a month now since Lance Armstrong shocked the cycling world with his admission of "inexplicable fraudulent athleticism"—or more succinctly, cheating! Armstrong, the former Olympian (and very likely soon to be a former multi-millionaire) finally admitted what many have suspected for years: that he was a real dope about doping. He now joins the ranks of other rank athletes who have sold their bodies to modern alchemy for the glory of gold! His self-incriminating admission came after years of dogged speculation and, conveniently, once the statute of limitations had run out!

The media, by and large, has feigned outrage over all of this. Late night comics, though, put things into proper perspective. Jay Leno echoed the widespread public skepticism:

Although [Armstrong] denied [doping] for years, it was starting to become obvious, ... particularly the year he won the [Tour de France] on a stationary bike.

Jimmy Kimmel, though, was a bit more philosophical about it: "What is the secret of Lance Armstrong's success? He always stays positive." Stephen Colbert, however, captured the essence of Armstrong's personal tragedy:

Point is, this man is a hero...He beat cancer, then he went on to beat something even less popular: the French.

It's easy to poke a little fun here. However, one does wonder where Lance goes now with his public confession. Does he get a fresh start? Will he be sued? Will he be fined? Is he really sorry? Who

knows? In many ways, he has evolved into a Shakespearean MacBeth, providing yet another example of where ambition beyond moral restraint often brings a person to ruin. Besides his obvious PR problem, Armstrong will face the consequences of his shortsighted actions probably for the rest of his life on the basis of trust issues alone (who's going to believe him?)—consequences borne because of how his actions and his ambition impacted others, both friends and foes alike. Cheating is rarely morally neutral or easily forgotten.

In many respects, the fall of Lance Armstrong is a morality tale for our time. Though it offers no new insights into human nature, it speaks to what people struggle with in making decisions and choices all the time. You and I can ask ourselves, what motivates us to do what we do? Some will admit, in a quest to stand out, to excel, to be extraordinary in a career or competitive field, they will risk their ruin and, whether or not they're caught being unethical, often will feel the pangs of regret. Could I have made a better choice? Did being selfish serve me well?

The point is, the choices we make—large or small, significant or seemingly insignificant, do matter. The decisions we make as individuals shape the course of our lives—who we are, what we do, where we'll be, how we'll get there. Life is an accumulation of choices and decisions made along the way that are wise and sometimes not so wise—that advance us prudently, or set us back foolishly. Though singular moments may not ultimately define us, the behavioral patterns we follow usually do. We tend to be what we consistently do. If we are consistently honest and noble, we will be viewed as such. If we are not, we will be seen for who we are.

Our text for today offers a similar message, i.e., making choices that are wise, true to who we should be, and not regretful over the course of life. It's the story of challenges Jesus likely faced in his own life, related perhaps to his own ambition, psyche, and spirituality—a passage better known as the “temptations of Christ.” The account of this story is meant to be more proverbial than literal, in that they are tests that anyone might face over the course of life, as they are reflective of the struggles of human nature. In the face of those challenges, Jesus made his moral choices—not to succumb to the temptations that seem to exemplify the human drama with life. Let me explain.

The story we have in Luke states that sometime following his baptism Jesus went out into the Judean wilderness for a period of testing—presumably for a time to confirm his calling and find his focus. He did this through a period of fasting.

Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice meant for disciplining one's spirit—a self-imposed crisis through a period of extended deprivation that gives a person insight into the various attitudes, desires, and needs that control him or her. The effect is straightforward: when your needs are not met, when your desires are unsatisfied, and when you are out of your comfort zone, the stress amplifies what normally controls your spirit and motivates your actions. You get to clearly see the person you are, what kind of character you possess, how much control you have over your fundamental needs and desires. For that reason, fasting has been a part of the Lenten regimen for many Christian traditions (Orthodoxy and Catholicism, in particular).

In this story Jesus was first tested to turn a stone into a loaf of bread to satisfy his deep hunger. Aside from the obvious motivation with being famished, it was meant to reveal his control over his personal life and bodily needs—for nourishment, for comfort, for sexual gratification, for physical strength. What choices would he make when his basic needs were unsatisfied? Similar to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, turning stones into bread meant, could Jesus maintain control over all of his bodily needs and impulses, so that he could choose when to be satisfied and not be driven uncontrollably toward it?

That's a fundamental issue of spiritual control—the spirit mastering the body, expressed in many religious traditions. Those who master their body and senses have a tremendous advantage over those who can't in terms of spiritual strength, focus, and consciousness. When we consider all the ways that people take advantage of others to satisfy their personal needs, all the time and effort spent seeking satisfaction and comfort, having control over these natural drives and perceived needs is fundamental to a person's capacity to make choices that are right for the moment, or that are not self-gratifying, hedonistic, and selfish—the very things that tend to get people into trouble. To be able to deny one's own needs and exercise control over one's body at a time when those needs are starving for satisfaction is critical in terms of mastering oneself. Jesus' resistance to give in to his bodily needs was representative of mastering the human condition; to maintain control under duress was essential to maintaining a right and selfless spirit.

The second of the challenges tested Jesus' ego, as well as his ambition for influence and authority, i.e., the proverbial quest for power, prestige, respect, and privilege. This is a classic ambition for human beings (e.g., male ego), particularly seductive to anyone with a fertile and competitive desire to be number one. One way to appreciate this is that Lance Armstrong, like many others, likely didn't lie and cheat because he was fundamentally unethical; he did it, and justified it, because of the overwhelming ambition to be at the top of his game. The rewards for being *numero uno* seemed to beckon it—win at all costs. Yet, this classic Faustian flaw renders those who would seek to rule their world finding themselves enslaved to it—they lose their life chasing after that which they hope to gain. In effect, that's what Jesus rejected—the temptation to sell his soul to the devil for personal glory or to place his ego needs above all else.

The last temptation in this story takes us away from run-of-the-mill human character issues. It had more to do with Jesus' own sense of spirituality. Perhaps this is only applicable to religious people, who aspire to intimacy with God.

The challenge before Jesus was to test his confidence in God—to prove to the Judean world his status before YHWH the Almighty One, where angels would deliver him in a time of crisis—a critical component of spiritual security. Why would this be considered a temptation? Was this representative of a desire within Jesus to prove to those around him of his special calling and purpose? It's hard to say. But it certainly raised the issue of, would God be there for him when his life was on the line? That's a question many of us wrestle

with when we're faced with personal risks, or even the reality of our own death. Will God be there for us? Do we have that confidence?

Yet, the issue here in the story is the difference between *trusting* God and *testing* God. Jesus' response suggests that possessing confidence in God's power to protect and deliver doesn't require testing this trust—it's meant to be assumed and certain. The confidence of love, if it's experienced on a regular basis in meaningful ways, doesn't require a supreme test. In fact, it's insulting to the lover for the one who is loved to test that confidence. In this story, Jesus resisted the temptation to have to dramatically prove God's faithfulness to him, since doing so would have only revealed his own uncertainties of God's love and presence. It didn't need to be tested.

If you are like me, when you reflect on this story long enough, you begin to realize that this isn't just about Jesus, this is also a story about any of us who wrestle with similar feelings and uncertainties and challenges in life. Part of trying to cultivate a spiritual consciousness and self-awareness involves asking yourself: what motivates me in any given situation? What underlies the choices I make in my life? Have I mastered my senses so that I'm not driven to do something shortsighted, selfish, and foolish? Am I secure as a person so that my ego needs don't compel me to make poor choices that I'll later regret? Do I trust God enough so that I do not take stupid, unnecessary chances or, on the other hand, act in ways that selfishly preserve me when I should be taking valiant risks?

As I see it, the temptations of Jesus represent the self-examination we all go through to test the motivations and needs behind our decisions and moral choices. Are we making choices that

we'll later regret, or are they wise—decisions upon which we can build trust with others, live transparently and honestly, and reflect the integrity and selflessness that better serve us in the long run?

The choices we make don't have to become the regrets we carry if we choose wisely and well in a manner we're called to. It's a part of being human, to be sure, but remember, there's also a part of God within us. Sometimes, we just need to be reminded that we're enough like God to make our being human a little bit easier and a little bit better for everyone.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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