

*“Risking Challenge”*

Ryan Mills shared the following humorous story of four pastors at a clergy retreat, “One night around the fireplace they decided to share with each other their biggest struggle, their **greatest temptation**. ‘My temptation is food,’ said the first, ‘I’m always thinking about what to eat, I’m always gorging myself in secret, it’s really unhealthy, it’s really a problem.’ ‘Oh that’s nothing,’ says the next pastor. ‘My temptation is gambling, online, at the track, I didn’t even write a sermon last week, I was so busy betting on the ponies.’ ‘Mine is worse,’ says the third. ‘I sometimes can’t control the urge to drink, I once even broke into the sacristy to drink the Communion wine, I need to get help.’ ‘Well mine is worse than all of yours,’ says the last. ‘My temptation is gossip, I just can’t keep a secret at all. And if you don’t mind I’m just going to step out and make a few phone calls!’” (Sermon on Matthew 4:1-11, by The Rev. Dr. Ryan Mills posted on [www.theologie.uzh.ch](http://www.theologie.uzh.ch))

The **Temptation of Jesus** was very different from the temptations of those clergy in Mills’ story. Why did Matthew, Mark, and Luke include their versions of the Temptation of Jesus in their gospels? What did the Gospel of John say about Jesus’ temptations? **What was the reason that Jesus allowed himself to go through Temptation?**

The Synoptic Gospels included their versions of the Temptation of Jesus early, at the very beginning of Jesus’ Ministry. Mark’s account was very terse and did not provide any content of the nature of the temptations. Evidently, Mark was unaware of the details about the report of Jesus’ Temptation. Matthew and Luke seem to have had a different common source – often referred to as Q by Biblical Scholars. However, Matthew and Luke had significant differences. **Those differences between those three gospels suggest to me that their sources were not as factual and accurate as we would have liked for them to have been.**

Additionally, the Gospel of John did not report Jesus having the Temptation experience reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. However, the Gospel of John did give some indications that Jesus faced temptation in his Public Ministry. For example, during the last week of Jesus’ Ministry and Life, after Philip and Andrew informed him that some Greeks wanted to meet him, Jesus said in **John 12:27**, *“Now my heart is troubled – and what shall I say? Shall I say, ‘Father, do not let this hour come upon me’? But that is why I came – so that I might go through this hour of suffering.”* That sounds very much like part of the report of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, doesn’t it? John did not report it as being part of his account of what happened at Gethsemane. Perhaps, John is the more accurate account of Jesus’ Temptations.

**What was the reason that Jesus allowed himself to go through Temptation?** There are two parts of Matthew’s account of the Temptation of Jesus, which are helpful, as we seek an answer to that question. Matthew reported in **verse 4**, *“the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted”*. So, God led Jesus through the Holy Spirit to go to be tempted. Why was that the case? Just prior to Jesus being led to the desert to be tempted, he was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. While he was baptized, he heard God’s Voice proclaim Jesus to be God’s Son. It seems to me, the Synoptic Gospel authors believed **Jesus needed to face the challenge of being tempted to give up his Purpose and to give in to his personal wants and desires – to put himself first. Jesus’ risking himself being Tempted indicated he understood it was important, for him to go through that experience, so that he would be able to proceed through the entire time of his Public Ministry to the fulfillment of his and God’s Purpose.** God’s approval of that process and of Jesus’ obedience to his Purpose was indicated in **verse 11**, *“Then the Devil left Jesus; and angels came and helped him.”*

Kate Matthews affirmed my conclusion when she wrote, “So the test is really about” **“Jesus’ faithfulness to who he is and what God is calling him to do”** “: not to ask for special privileges or place or relief, but to enter fully into this human condition of want and need and pain.”

Matthews concluded, “Like those earlier Christians who settled into a comfortable faith, we’re tempted today to turn away from the suffering of the world, tempted to build our own defenses against doubt and risk, tempted to

concentrate not only on our own needs but also our wants, before thinking of others.” **“In doing so, we forget who we are, too, and fall prey to the tempter.”** (“One Voice, One Choice” by Kate Matthews posted on Weekly Seeds)

Our second Scripture from the Gospel of Matthew also raises the situation of **Jesus Teaching that he and we are called to Risk Challenge**, so that he and we might fulfill our Purpose – live in the New Faith Relationship with God and the New Life in Christ. The situation described by Matthew reminds me of a story I received in an email. “A young lady was soaking up the sun’s rays on a Florida beach when a little boy in his swimming trunks, carrying a towel, came up to her and asked her, **‘Do you believe in God?’** She was surprised by the question but she replied, ‘Why, yes, I do.’ Then he asked her: **‘Do you go to church every Sunday?’** Again, her answer was ‘Yes!’ He then asked: **‘Do you read your Bible and pray everyday?’** Again she said, ‘Yes!’ By now her curiosity was very much aroused. The little lad sighed with relief and said, **‘Will you hold my quarter while I go in swimming?’**”

The source of that story went on to explain, “The little boy was straightforward and honest in his questions because he wanted to entrust to the lady with something valuable.” Referring to the Matthew Scripture the explanation concluded, “The Pharisees are not being honest. They have no intent in entrusting Jesus with anything. They are not looking for the answer to a question. They don’t want someone to hold their quarter.” (“What Is Caesar’s and What Is God’s?” posted on sermons.com by the staff)

Yes, the Pharisees and their allies against Jesus asked him questions for a purpose, which was not honorable and true. Matthew indicated that fact in **verse 15, “The Pharisees went off and made a plan to trap Jesus with questions.”** Near the conclusion of the Reading, Matthew also reported Jesus understood he was **Risking Challenge** by being questioned by the Pharisees and their co-conspirators. Matthew wrote in **verse 18, “Jesus, however, was aware of their evil plan, and so he said, ‘You hypocrites! Why are you trying to trap me?’** Jesus then went on to answer their trick question about paying Roman taxes with his teaching about the coin used to pay the taxes. Following Jesus’ exposing their true intentions and crushing their trap with his answer, Matthew reported in **verse 22, “When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.”** Jesus was victorious when he risked the challenge by the Pharisees and their allies.

Indeed, during that last week, **Jesus didn’t “lay low.”** He put himself out there, susceptible to those who wanted to trap him and twist his words. **Jesus wanted to open us to a deeper conviction of the call to follow him – to be moved and motivated by him in the way we live our lives — to have a faithful perspective.**

David Lose pointed out, “Perhaps faith ... doesn’t do away with the hardships that are part and parcel of this life, but rather gives us the courage to stand amid them, not simply surviving but actually flourishing in and through Jesus, the one who was tempted as we are and thereby knows our struggles first hand.” Lose concluded, **“This same Jesus now invites us to find both hope and courage in the God who named not only him, but all of us, beloved children so that we, also, might discover who we are ... recalling whose we are.”** (Commentary on Matthew 4:1-11 by David Lose posted on workingpreacher.org)

Especially, during challenging times, such as that which we face in the world today, we need to not give up on living our Purpose – our New Faith Relationship with God and one another and living the New Life in Jesus Christ. Following Jesus’ example, we are called to **Risk the Challenges** which others and the world put in our way to be persons, who **faithfully live the New Life of self-giving and sacrificial agape love, invite All People to share in it, and welcome All People.** Amen.