

One of the things I love to do is look up “quotable quotes.” And this week I found a great one from the flirty, bawdy Mae West, probably Hollywood’s most notorious sex kitten of the 1930s. It may be one of her signature lines: “I was pure as snow until I drifted.”

Mae West reveled in being a temptress, but most temptations are so much more complex than what she offered. Most temptations we encounter are far more subtle than seduction by a blonde bombshell (who, by the way, I never thought was all that much of a bombshell – but I digress).

We’re more likely to *drift off course* in trying to achieve something positive than pursuing something obviously evil. *Real* temptation calls us to do things that are not all *bad*, but contain *some* good. Even Mae West whispering in your ear is luring you to something that I suppose is good, just in the wrong circumstances.

For centuries Christians have read the story of Jesus’ temptations on the first Sunday of Lent, the season of repentance, a time to take stock of our lives and the direction we’re headed, a time to concentrate on renewal.

Lent is a time to deal with our sin, our separation from God, how we’ve *drifted*, missed the mark, but it’s a lot more than that as well. Lent is not just for moralists, not just for tsk-tsking. Repentance means more than being sorry that we’ve *drifted* and succumbed to temptation.

Think about how Jesus dealt with sin and sinners. You can’t help but notice as we read the gospel record that Jesus hung out with these people we call “sinners.” Take, for instance, tax collectors. In ancient Palestine, controlled by the Romans, Jews considered tax collectors to be sinners. Tax collectors took from the poor and gave to the oppressive, exploitative Romans, and they made as much profit as possible for themselves, often by corrupt, illegal means.

What was Jesus’ approach? Jesus *befriended* sinners, and it scandalized everyone. When Jesus called Levi the tax collector to follow him, Levi threw a party with the disreputable types, and the upright religious folks came by and attacked Jesus for eating and drinking with sinners.

Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, a rich man, sought Jesus, climbed a tree so he could see Jesus, and Jesus called him, and then Zacchaeus took Jesus to his house. Jesus said nothing critical of Zacchaeus, but rather could actually be said to have improved

Zacchaeus' status, a holy man going to a sinner's home. Zacchaeus *then* changed his behavior, promised to give away half his income to the poor and to repay quadruple those he had cheated. A big change of life. But here's the kicker: Jesus had never *told* him to repent.

This, to some extent, is a pattern in Jesus' ministry. Jesus often called on people *in general* to repent, but he never condemned, or scolded, or criticized, individuals in trying to get them to repent. Never. Jesus hung out with sinners and crooks, and some of the sinners repented after they had been part of Jesus' circle, but not because Jesus cajoled them in any negative way to repent. They *belonged* first, felt accepted, close to Jesus, and *then*, out of that relationship, they changed.

I imagine that Jesus used this approach because it's a lot more effective than drawing a line, implying that I know what's best for you and you don't. The truth is, we *all* need to repent: but repentance that's forced, that's cajoled, that's "commanded," isn't really repentance, is it?

In Jewish scripture, the Hebrew word we translate as "repentance" means "to turn" or "to return." It implies a journey of return. It has its roots in an historical event: the people of Israel were taken away into exile in Babylon. Decades later, when they were released from captivity, they returned to the Holy Land, the land of milk and honey, the Promised Land, the place of God's presence. From the point of Jewish scripture then, repentance is not so much about making oneself feel horrible, but rather about a return to God, being close to God, being in relationship with God.

The evangelists and Paul imply this return imagery in their writings, but they wrote in Greek, not Hebrew, and the Greek word for repentance is "*metanoia*," which literally means "to change one's mind or heart," or more precisely "to go beyond the mind we have now." Repentance implies seeing in a new way, seeing beyond convention, beyond what we *think* we know. There's an element of *learning* in it. Repentance, the season of Lent, places *less* emphasis on sin and contrition as so often emphasized in the medieval and Victorian periods of our Church's history, and *more* emphasis on change, growth, seeing in new ways, going beyond where we are now.

The value of reading the temptation story in Lent is not merely Jesus the great moral exemplar, the one who can put Satan in his place. Perhaps more significant, Jesus' responses to the devil help us see God in new ways – they raise our sights. Jesus helps us see God's way more clearly.

Let's ponder that a moment.

First, the devil asked Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit, the gentle, dove-like Spirit, suffered hunger. He didn't eat for forty days (which is Hebrew for "a long time" – it may or may not have been literally forty days). Weakened, famished, the devil tempted Jesus' control over his physical desire. It's a temptation for Jesus to take away the physical suffering of the world. Surely, the millions who hunger pray and long for God to take away their suffering, to turn stone into bread. Surely, God could do that. Why doesn't God do that? Perhaps we see that's *our* role, *our* work. Repentance, returning to God, involves serving others, sharing and caring, giving and receiving care.

Second, the devil offered Jesus political power, the potential to do good on an enormous scale, the possibility of creating Utopia, the perfect community. The devil offered a kingdom of this world where justice and peace are compelled, but not freely chosen by the people. Surely, the oppressed and exploited of the world, the victims of war and violence, pray and long for God to act, to use divine power to crush human power. Why doesn't God do so? Maybe we see that it undermines the possibility for *people* to have authentic, close relationship, to be together united despite conflict and differences. Repentance, returning to God, involves reconciling with others.

Third, the devil prompted Jesus to test God, to make God prove himself. If Jesus leaped from the top of the Temple, God would act to save Jesus. The religious authorities would fall in line behind Jesus. All people would recognize Jesus as Son of God. Surely, in a world where God often seems absent, those longing for proof of God's existence long for God to reveal himself, to be clear about himself. Why doesn't God do that? Maybe we see that it eliminates the *journey* to God. The devil wants Jesus to give us instant gratification instead of having us engage in the work of life. The devil says faith in God, trust in God, must be coerced, forced. Repentance, returning to God, involves growing and learning, a gradual change of heart and mind.

If Jesus had succumbed to any of the temptations, he would have diminished human dignity, his vision of us as children of God. Instead, the good news: by refusing the devil, Jesus affirmed

- that we are capable of caring for each other and sharing what we have;
- that we are capable of working together and being close to each other;
- that we are capable of growth and learning.

That is far more important a message than forcing anything on anyone – even repentance, important as it is.