

1st Sunday in Lent-Cycle C-2025

In the final scene of the movie “Devil’s Advocate,” a reporter approaches a lawyer who experienced a crisis of conscience. The lawyer had gone from doing the wrong thing to pursuing the right course of action. The reporter wanted an exclusive story. He sought to charm him by telling him: “This is 60 minutes material.” “Your story needs to be told.” “You’re a star.” Flattered by these compliments, the lawyer agrees to meet with him the next day. All of a sudden, the face of the reporter turns into that of the devil, and with a prideful smile, he stated: “Vanity, definitely my favorite sin.”

I have a shocking question for you. What is your favorite sin? The answer to that question will reveal your favorite temptation because temptation always precedes sin. The reality of temptation is the theme of our Gospel reading. The poet and playwright Oscar Wilde, known for a deep devotion to a life of pleasure without limits, once remarked: “The best way to handle temptation is to give into it.” Do these words also shock you? For some of us, maybe for all of us, it

should not. We eagerly and easily give into temptation if we are ignorant of, indifferent to, or resistant towards God in a given moment, period, or area of our lives.

As we grow in our desire and commitment to be faithful to Jesus Christ, we come to experience temptation as a form of spiritual, mental, emotional, relational, and/or physical suffering. This is the price and power of love. We want to please God even though it can cause us varying degrees and types of anguish and feelings of deprivation. It is truly an experience of the cross. If we are willing to cling to, and keep our eyes on Jesus, in the midst of the temptation storm, we eventually experience resurrection in that area of our lives.

I would like to reflect on one powerful form of temptation through the following words of the song “Desperado” by the “Eagles:” “Desperado, why don’t you come to your senses? You’ve been out riding fences for so long now. Oh, you’re a hard one, but I know that you got your reasons. These things that are pleasing you, can hurt you somehow.” One of the biggest temptations in life is to always “ride the fence.” We can be tempted to do so in our relationship with God, which includes our beliefs and moral choices;

our relationships with family and significant people in our lives; living out our careers and calling from God, and in the personal and professional decisions we make. We can be tempted to ride the fence to avoid conflict and rejection, because of a fear of intimacy and commitment, out of a spirit of self-preservation and selfishness, or due to paralyzing insecurities or an aversion to failure. What are the ways that we tend to ride the fence?

Since the very air we breathe is permeated by the values of our society, we often ride the fence because of our cultural affinity to want to keep our options open. We want our personal world to be full of endless choices, and we want to freely indulge whatever happens to capture our fancy at any given moment. It can be this way in multiple areas or dimensions of our lives. For example, our relationship with streaming movie services. We are delighted that we have so many movie options. Nonetheless, when we finally make a choice, it can be hard to be fully present to the movie. Why? Due to the tendency for our minds to fast forward to all the other movie options that await us. Therefore, we struggle to fully savor the movie we are watching.

Since we live in an upgrade culture, we can be profoundly influenced by an upgrade mentality, in small and significant ways. We want to upgrade to the latest iPhone or Android smart phone. We want to upgrade our clothing wardrobe. We want to upgrade to the newest gun or fishing equipment. What are the ways that we tend to embrace an upgrade mentality?

It can permeate our consciousness and negatively influence our relationship with God and other people. We want to upgrade God. We do this by continually creating God, faith, and morality in our own image and likeness. For those of you married or dating, you may want to upgrade your spouse or significant other by excessively pushing them to become who you want them to be or by leaving them for another person.

We ride the fence if we always want to keep our options open and become addicted to upgrading everyone and everything in our lives. This brings to mind the chorus of the song "Ride On" by AC/DC: "I'm gonna ride on. Ride on. One of these days, I'm gonna change my evil ways. Till then, I'll keep riding on." The language of "riding the fence" is captured in the phrases, "one of these days, I'm gonna change my evil ways" and "till then." Prior to his full conversion of life,

St. Augustine prayed: “Lord, help me to change, just not yet.” We can all readily identify with that sentiment. As we keep “riding on” and “kicking the can down the road,” may we be mindful of the sobering truth that “as sand through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives.” There will come a day when the last grain of sand will fall, and our earthly lives will have come to an end. Then we will have to give account of our journey before God, who is our merciful and just Judge.

Please don't get me wrong, there are areas of our lives in which it is good and healthy to keep our options open and embrace upgrades. This is especially true when it comes to our own personal and spiritual growth and evolution. On the other hand, we can be tempted to keep our options open and continually upgrade, in some rather unhealthy and unholy ways.

In the Sacred Scriptures, God is continually inviting and challenging us to someone who does not ride the fence. We are called to be an “all in” person. We are called to love God with “all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.” We are also called to be willing to leave everyone and everything behind in commitment to follow Him and do His will. In our commitments to

other people, He calls us to be “all in” by being a person of faithfulness, honesty, sacrifice, and forgiveness. In our careers and vocations, he calls us to be “all in” for the sake of the Kingdom of God, by loving and serving Him and other people. He promises us that we will be blessed in this life and in eternity.

The message of the Gospel is that we are called to make choices that in certain ways, limits or totally removes other options. I know what I am about to say is very countercultural, but God does not will for us to encounter every person, pleasure, experience, sensation, or opportunity, this world has to offer. Instead, within the context of our lives and commitments, we are called to upgrade ourselves and how we relate to God, other people, ourselves, and our career and God given calling. There is a unique God given joy and freedom that comes from being content with and giving ourselves fully to who we have, what we have, how we are, and what we are called to do. In a spirit of awe, wonder, and gratitude, we more profoundly discover and explore the heart of God, the heart of another person, our own heart, and the meaning of purpose of our lives.

We live into the epiphany that the “grass is not always greener on the other side.” Taking it a step further, we learn that some plots of green grass are never meant to be ours. We are called to focus on our own “green grass,” and do all we can, with the help of God, to make it even greener, full of life and vitality. In this way, we are no longer riding fences. Instead, we are “riding on,” “all in” for God, and the enjoyment of the gifts and blessings that He has bestowed on us, within the God given boundaries of our own journey.

Henry David Thoreau “hit the nail on the head” when he poetically expressed the sentiment that we are to: “Suck the marrow out of life.” This is so true. The big caveat to these words of inspiration would be “only as God intended for us.” May we daily strive to color in the lines that God has given us on a personal level and as a human family. In doing so, we will save ourselves from a lot of temptation and sin, and therefore, heartache.

