

KNOWING WHEN TO RUN
Genesis 39:1-2, 6b-16

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In Kenny Rogers' greatest hit, he meets up with a gambler who gives him this advice:

*You got to know when to hold 'em
Know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away and know when to run
You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table
There's time enough for countin' when the dealings done.*

In this soap opera episode from the life of Joseph, which is our scripture lesson for today, Joseph knows when to run. Maybe there is a lesson from the life of Joseph for all of us who struggle with temptations in our lives.

TEMPTATIONS ARE REAL

They are real for all of us. In a few moments we will pray, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one." Why would Jesus have taught us to pray for deliverance from temptation unless he knew we would be subjected to temptation?

The synoptic gospels all tell the story of Jesus' temptation, the sinless one struggling in the desert for his very soul. Paul says in I Corinthians 10:13 "No temptation has seized you except what is common for human beings. And God is faithful, and will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." Of course that is absolutely true, but there are times in my life when I wish God did not trust me so much.

While temptations come in all shapes and sizes, Richard Foster, in his classic book, The Challenge of the Disciplined Life, says there are three particular temptations that are present especially for modern Americans. They are sex, power, and money. All three are vividly present in this Old Testament episode from the life of Joseph.

Sex — When God made you and God made me, he made us sexual beings. "So God created human beings in his own image, male and female he created us." Our human sexuality is grounded in the image of God. Our maleness and femaleness is not just a convenient way to keep the human race going. It is at the very center of our humanity. Long before Hollywood profited from erotic movies, Adam and Eve frolicked in the garden naked and unashamed. True intimacy with another human being enhances our identity, bonds our relationships, and empowers us to be co-creators with God.

Mrs. Potiphar's problem in this story, however, is that she does not know the

difference between love and lust, between intensity and intimacy. Listen to the text. “Now Joseph was a hunk and after a while Mrs. Potiphar laid eyes on him and said come to bed with me.” This goes on for days. It is all about lust, but not much about love. It is all about intensity and desire, but hardly anything about intimacy.

Lust dehumanizes persons turning people into things to acquire, prizes to win, objects to control. Intensity empowers the desire, but it lacks the common ground of intimacy. “What’s love got to do with it?” we might ask out of this Old Testament episode and we might rightfully say, “Absolutely nothing.” The tragedy of our day is that much that is sold as making love has little to do with love and has everything to do with lust.

The second temptation at play in this story is power. Mrs. Potiphar has the power. True power sets people free. Power used at the right time, in the right place, in the right way, is a wonderful liberator. But power gone bad becomes pride. “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall,” says the writer of Proverbs.

Oscar Schindler used his power in World War II to save 1200 Jews from the gas chambers. Those whose lives he saved hailed him as a hero, as rightly they should. But after the war, Oscar Schindler abandoned his wife, became a womanizer and drank himself to death. He, who used his power to save others, could not find the power to save himself.

In Louisville, Kentucky, there have been more than 160 charges brought against priests for immoral and illegal behavior with children. Some of these priests are acquaintances of mine. This scandal in the Church is a tragedy of unimaginable proportions, with implications for all of us who embrace the faith. When power expresses itself through sex the result is harassment and abuse. Neither the Church nor the Country can afford to sweep it under the carpet.

“Money,” says Foster, “is our third major temptation.” You see, Joseph could have made a lot of money in this story by merely going along with the boss’ wife.

Like sex and power, money can do a lot of good. Money buys food, shelter, clothing, education, opportunity. Wesley advised early Methodists to “earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” It was a trilogy that is still particularly true in understanding how to handle our finances.

The dark side of money, however, is greed. Richard Foster says, “Our lust for more and more is clearly psychotic. It has caused us to lose touch with reality.” When I read that again this week I thought, “Richard, you’re exaggerating! Psychotic? Is that the word you really want to use to describe this lust for more in our materialistic world?” Then, I picked up Friday’s paper to see the pictures of the former WorldCom CFO and chief controller being carried off to jail, accused of hiding billions in expenses and lying to investors and regulators in a

desperate bid to keep the company afloat.

Let us not be fooled in this place or any place. Temptations are real. They knock on your door and they knock on mine. They come in varied forms and they cut at the very core of who we are. Not a day goes by but what we struggle between what is right and what is wrong in society and in our personal lives.

That brings me to the second simple point I want to make today. INTEGRITY IS POSSIBLE. The reason this Old Testament story shines out of history and we tell it to our children and affirm it in church is that integrity is possible. Lewis Smedes says, "Integrity is about being a certain kind of person. It is about staying true to what we are even when it would cost us what we should not have to pay." Integrity is not an accessory we wear when convenient, but an essential we embrace at the very core of our being. Integrity is to our character what our liver might be to our body. It is necessary for life.

"Don't compromise your integrity" is the recurring theme throughout the scriptures. Jesus said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off." This is an extreme kind of analogy. What He is trying to say to us is that it is better for you to be blind in one eye and one handed than to live without integrity.

There are some simple things that people of integrity do. People of integrity HONOR RELATIONSHIPS. They recognize they are not in the world simply to consume at the expense of other people. Joseph asks, "What about Mr. Potiphar?" Did you catch that in the story? "He has withheld nothing from me except his wife. How can I do this to him?"

The truth is none of us live alone, none of us sin alone. We have parents, spouses, children, grandchildren, friends, co-workers, a church, and a community to whom we are accountable. On the one hand there is temptation. On the other hand there is a wedding band, to remind us of the one who would not understand. When we honor our commitments, when we stick to our priorities, when we act like the person we believe ourselves to be, we strengthen our trustworthiness with others.

There are a few things that people of integrity do. People of integrity honor their relationships. People of integrity KNOW WHEN TO RUN. Verse 12, "And he ran out of the house."

A sports writer asked pro golfer, Sam Snead, how to handle the rough on the golf course. "That's simple," said Snead, "don't get in it."

Remember that old line from Hee-Haw days. This guy comes in to Doc Campbell and says, "I broke my arm in two places." To which Doc responds, "Then, you ought to stay out of them places." Distance is a legitimate way to handle the struggles of life. There are times when the best thing we can do is run.

Someone asked Muhammad Ali how he handled the temptations of being a celebrity. The great boxer responded, "Well, I carry a box of matches with me wherever I go. When I find myself at a party tempted by a beautiful woman, I pull out a match, strike it, and then I put it out with my fingers and it burns a little bit. Then I say to myself, 'Hell is a whole lot hotter than this match,' and I'm drawn back to reality again." Sometimes it is just smart to run. People of integrity know when to run, when to distance themselves from the temptations.

People of integrity ARE WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE. If you and I were writing this story we would write it differently, would we not? We would have Joseph blessed, promoted, taken care of, and rejoicing as a result of holding on to his personal integrity in a very compromising situation. The facts are he winds up in prison, in jail.

Cleveland Stroud had coached the Blue Collar Bulldogs for eighteen years before they got to the state basketball championship. It was a perfect night and Stroud held the championship trophy high over his head as his team paraded him around the court on their shoulders. Two months later, during a routine grade check, one of the Bulldog players was declared ineligible to play. The kid had played only a total of forty-five seconds in the state tournament. "But your principles have to be higher than your goals," reasoned Stroud as he reported the error and forfeited the championship.

So, Joseph winds up in prison. Somebody said, "Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is a little bit like expecting a bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian." It just doesn't make sense in the real world and you are probably not going to profit from being a person of integrity.

*God never said you'd only see sunshine
He never said there'd be no rain
He only promised a heart full of singing
About the very things that cause you pain.*

You see, people of integrity are willing to pay the price. And therein lies the story of Joseph.

So on our way to communion today let us face our temptations with integrity. Let us find in the sacrament of Holy Communion the grace and strength to carry on. It could make all the difference. Amen.

