

[BLANK] [PRAYER] I am glad to see you all today, after what I thought would be a quiet week. It wasn't. I was here, there, and everywhere, trying to catch up with things, and to meet commitments. Sometimes, my commitments are things like: pick up vegetable juice at the supermarket. Now, there are generally two types of people in the supermarket: the type who picks up what they came for, and the type who picks up what they find. I tend to pick up things that I came for. But that doesn't mean that I don't notice the things that people are invited to find.

[CHECKOUT] And so, as I picked up some vegetable juice at the supermarket the other day, I was noticing just how hard supermarkets try to get you to pay attention to things that you don't need - and things that can distract you from your own life. Of course, there are countless pounds of candy waiting for us at the checkout line. And there are also the tabloid magazines, giving us gossip about what famous people are doing in the world. Affairs. Divorces. Dirty secrets. You name it, it's all there. In fact, they even have magazines that will give you gossip about characters in TV soap operas - artificial gossip, about make-believe people. We can't seem to get enough of gossip. [BLANK]

Given that pretty much everyone in America has to go through those checkout lines every week, it tends to confirm the words the apostle Paul gives us today in our reading from First Corinthians 10: “No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people.” Those things are there at the checkout line because we all have common temptations. Most people are tempted by those small snacks. Most people will at least sneak a peek at those sensational headlines on the tabloids, while we're waiting to ring up our order. We have choices, at practically every corner of modern life, and at practically every corner is the temptation not to do the next right thing. [BLANK]

It is the next right thing that should always be the focus of our Christian discipleship as United Methodists. Our faith is not a “one and done” faith - our faith is a growing faith. We may cherish moments when we accept Jesus in our hearts as our salvation, as John Wesley did at a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, years ago. But, like John Wesley, we learn from our discipleship that those moments are just a taste of the power and assurance from God that we will need to move forward in faith.

This is what makes United Methodism special, and powerful. We do believe in spreading faith in Jesus Christ throughout God's world. But we also believe that receiving that faith is a journey towards the next right thing, towards becoming more and more like the God who loves us, and who wants to save us, through faith in Jesus Christ. And we believe that God's assurance is in our hearts, not to make us right, but to make us stronger Christian disciples, through trusting in God's power, and not our power.

Jesus knew how easy it was for us to be tempted away from God's power. In today's reading from Luke 13, Jesus reminds us that people in the time of Jesus had their own version of supermarket tabloids to distract people. In the time of Jesus, it was the story of a brutal murder of people in God's Temple by King Herod, and people who died in the collapse of a large tower, that got people buzzing. They had their own gossip, about how what others did made their own sins seem small by comparison. And that is, after all,

why gossip is so tempting. It's always easy to focus on the wrongs of others, so that we don't face our own wrongs. Jesus would have none of that. He reminded people that sin is sin, and that it's never a matter of what the other person does that's worse. It's what we do as the next right thing, or wrong thing, that matters. It's our hearts that have to change. Not theirs. We must focus on spiritual health for, us, and for others - not sin - for our own sake, and theirs.

[HEARING] One of my commitments last week was to head up to the state Capitol in Hartford, to be at a hearing about the possible legalization of recreational marijuana sales. I stayed long enough to hear quite a bit of information. I have posted a letter that I have sent to our state delegation about this on our bulletin board, and I would be glad to talk about it with you. [BLANK]

Do I think that marijuana is a dangerous drug? It can be. Today's marijuana is often many times more powerful than what was used by people just a few decades ago, so powerful that DSM-V, the manual that describes psychological disorders, now lists Marijuana Addictive Disorders as problems that doctors might diagnose in their patients. And beverage makers are finding ways to sell drinks that contain both alcohol and the active ingredients of marijuana, where this will be allowed. I guess where there's money to be made, people will do anything, to anyone, to make a buck, even if it might hurt people.

We can all have opinions on this, of course, but my point today is this: why is it that we are asked to consider more and more things that distract us from a healthy life? Why is it that we are asked to add more and more things to our culture's shopping cart of destructive behaviors, like a huge checkout counter of local and global distractions? Why is it that we are, after all these thousands of years, not at all different from the people who the apostle Paul described in our reading from First Corinthians? Paul described the people of Israel, who were saved from slavery in Egypt by God, and led by God into a life of freedom, and hope. They were given food, and spiritual strength, from the God who loved them. They were given Ten Commandments through Moses, simple and enduring guidelines for how to love God, and to love one another. And yet, they stumbled into sin. They ignored the good things that God had given them, and took the easy way out, hurting themselves, and others, and their relationship with our God, who loved them enough to save them.

And mind you, that was in the wilderness, far from the Internet, far from TV, far from checkout lines, far from a corner liquor store, or a corner drug dealer. With almost no distractions, people still found a way to be tempted. We all think that we've got it under control. We think that we've got sin licked. We think that things are cool. Until they're not. Because, after all, we're only human.

My siblings in Christ, we don't have it under control. We don't. We just don't. When I work with others to help the young people of Meriden, and see young adults who have such a hard time understanding what it is to be an adult, and we think that everything is under control, we are just not being honest with ourselves. When I go into

practically any convenience store at a gas station, and almost everything in that store is bad for you - and the few things that are good for you are remarkably expensive - we are just not being honest with ourselves. We are in a culture that has normalized hurting people, and it hurts us, and others, equally. We all pay the price in our hearts.

Now, I promise worship that is joyful, and I promise you that the joyful parts are coming this morning, but joy without honesty is just a smiley-face kind of joy, not a joy that will endure, not a joy that can leap up for joy in Easter sunlight. We're here preparing in our season of Lent for Easter, the best and brightest and most amazing day of our Christian year. There will be an Easter bunny out there on Easter Sunday, there will be joyful children, joyful music, joyful decorations, joyful flowers, and the joy of Christian hope, hope that springs from an empty grave. That kind of joy is priceless. And so, if we are to be ready for the peace that passes all understanding in Christian joy on Easter, we need to be honest about just what kind of stone needs to be rolled away from our hearts to open that grave.

I know that we're all doing our best, often under very trying circumstances. I know that we all have our own burdens to bear in life, and often we don't have many people to help us bear them. But Jesus is here to help us to bear them. Jesus wants us to bear the fruit that comes from God's love in our hearts. Jesus wants to surround us with love and power from above, like a good gardener prepares the roots of a fruit tree that has stopped bearing fruit. No matter where we are in our lives, Jesus is ready in Lent to help us to bear that beautiful fruit of faith, fruit that will spread good things in God's world, not evil things, including the seeds of new faith, through our devotion to one another, and to God's world, in Jesus. And it all starts with one, simple thing: choosing the next right thing. Today, choose Jesus. Choose life. Choose to prepare for the joy of God, knowing that Jesus is our enduring promise for it, now, and forevermore. Amen.