

“All in All”

Mark 1:12-15

Colossians 3:1-11

Eunice Hunton Carter was exposed to violence at a young age, but this sermon is not about that violence. Eunice was born in Georgia in 1899. When she was only seven years old, white mobs roamed her neighborhood in Atlanta: attacking and killing people, burning homes and businesses. Her parents held the family together in prayer that night as they stayed to protect their home. When the massacre was over, Eunice’s family joined many Black people who fled, never to return. What would her life be?

Mark’s Gospel brings us to Jesus’s side in the wilderness. He’s only just been baptized, only just begun his public ministry of teaching, healing, ushering in the kingdom of God. But today, he’s in the wilderness. Today he is caught between wild animals that would tear him to pieces and angels who would take care of him. For forty days, testing, trials, scrutiny, and temptation were the rule of his waking hours, of his sleeping hours. Maybe the reason Mark doesn’t go into detail is that Jesus’s suffering was so profound. What would his life be?

We’re so used to thinking of temptation as something specific – will I lie about staying out too late or tell the truth? Will I cheat on my taxes because I think I can get away with it or not? Will I punch that neighbor who’s *really* been getting on my nerves or not? We see an angel on one shoulder and a demon on the other, make our decisions, and then go about our lives. Most of the time, we don’t have company on our shoulders, but then the divine/demonic contenders prepare to argue anew.

I think we see something different reflected through Eunice Carter’s life. Witnessing violence at such a young age, not knowing what would happen, changed everything. She couldn’t control the threat that day or the immediate impact it would have on her life. Still, as she

grew up, she made choices about her life, about who she would be and what she would pursue. Think of the temptations she must have faced: to be terrified and withdraw from society; to be enraged and never trust anyone; to be molded by powerlessness and just keep her head down.

Like her parents before her, she went to college. She worked as a social worker and then studied the law. In 1933 she passed the bar exam in New York and became a lawyer. I don't need to tell you how difficult it was for a Black woman to get work or recognition in the 1930s. Surely, the temptation was to pack it in. She worked at what they used to call Women's Courts where most of the cases had to do with prostitution. She built her reputation, even being chosen by the mayor for a commission that investigated a riot in Harlem. In 1935, Eunice was the "first black woman assistant district attorney in the state of New York." Not too long after that, Special Prosecutor Thomas E. Dewey chose her to be a deputy assistant in a massive case. He launched the biggest ever effort to bring down organized crime. Dewey's team was called "Twenty Against the Underworld" and Eunice was the only one who was not a white man.

Though Eunice was an ambitious and masterful lawyer, she was unquestionably at the bottom of the pecking order. Dewey and the others gave her the task they valued least: taking complaints from the public. Their temptation was to see her as less than and many probably didn't think twice about it. The thing about Eunice, though, is that she remembered working in the Women's Courts. She remembered that when prostitutes came through the system, many had the same few lawyers and bail bondsmen. When those lawyers appeared before the judge, suddenly the police officers couldn't remember details on the stand. When the women spoke, they had almost the same story. Their charges usually didn't stick.

Now, Dewey didn't want to be seen as a moral crusader – he wasn't interested in information that connected the mob and prostitution. His ambition, his temptation was to be the

great crusader against organized crime. Carter tried to convince him to listen to the evidence she had gathered. These few lawyers and bail bondsmen had close ties with the biggest mob boss of all – Charlie “Lucky” Luciano. Eunice resisted the temptation to back down. She risked her life going down to pool halls and bars, gathering information that led to wiretaps, interviews, raids, arrests. What she heard again and again was that the mafia forced prostitutes to pay half of their income to the mob or else they wouldn’t get access to the lawyers and bail bondsmen who had just the right corrupt combination to keep these women out of jail.

Carter was able to convince another prosecutor on their team that this was the key. Before this, the other lawyers hadn’t even thought it would be possible for the mafia to control prostitution. But, evidence in hand, they convinced Dewey to pursue the case. Ultimately, Lucky Luciano and 8 others were “convicted on 62 counts of compulsory prostitution” and he got a sentence of “30 to 50 years in state prison.” We remember of course that the only thing they could convict Al Capone on was tax evasion, right? Well, this was the first case where anyone with great power in organized crime was found guilty of a crime related to their criminal enterprise. That is huge. One imagines that Dewey may have been tempted to deny credit to this young Black woman who was essential to the conviction. Yet, after the trial, he publicly mentioned everything she had brought to the table.

In dedicating their lives to fight crime and pursue justice, Eunice and Dewey made the right choice. Yet, each time Eunice chose courage and perseverance, she made a new way through biases and expectations that were considered perfectly natural at the time. She did more than resist temptation – she led those around her to fight temptations they didn’t know they had.

We are here together because we believe in the hope and promise of salvation in Christ. As we begin our journey through Lent, we know that we will come face to face with the cross,

with his death, with his resurrection. Over the next six weeks, we will listen for Christ's calling to each of us. We will reflect on our own lives, our temptations, and our losses. Being Christian means that we are not bound to despair and powerlessness. We shouldn't live as though true pleasure and fulfillment comes through evil desires, mountains of things, wealth, or status. Those all so easily become gods of our own making. Relying on anything other than God for true meaning brings wrath. Wrath here means anger that comes with consequences. Here and now, we see that centering our lives on cruelty, greed, or anger is destructive to us and to our world.

Temptations are many – and more complicated than we like to think. But time and again, we can see what change comes into the world when we keep fighting for good. Our new selves are renewed, revived – our knowledge is reconfigured through God's own image. This renewal barrels through the categories we create of who can do what and who belongs where. If we affirm that Christ is all, we celebrate in the knowledge that Christ is all in all!

Loving Savior, it is not good for us to see some as more worthy than others. In the wilderness, you challenged all temptation we must face. On the cross, you claimed every human being as your own. Give us wisdom in our hearts and humility in our days to resist temptation, to seek your paths, to see Christ in his self-less love, and to nurture and support the spirit of Christ coming to life in each one we meet. Amen.

Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eunice_Carter
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1906_Atlanta_race_massacre
<https://www.tba.org/?pg=Articles&blAction=showEntry&blogEntry=51159>
<https://www.biography.com/crime/eunice-hunton-carter-lucky-luciano>
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/eunice-hunton-carter-1899-1970/>
<https://www.fordham.edu/school-of-law/alumni/alumni-of-distinction/eunice-carter/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucky_Luciano