

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

The Lord's Prayer: Our Unity

August 11, 2019

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**Psalm 5:1, 4-6, 9-12**

**Ephesians 6:10-17**

*... but deliver us from evil ...*



"The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain" by Duccio di Buoninsegna, ca 1310

Be off, Satan, from this door and these four walls. This is no place for you; there is nothing for you to do here. This is the place for Peter and Paul and the holy gospel; this is the place where I sleep, now that my worship is done, in the name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, send me your Spirit; instill the wisdom of your Holy Spirit into my heart; protect my soul and body, every limb in my body, every fiber of my being, from all possible harm and all traps the Devil may set for me and every temptation to sin.

- Part of the liturgy of the St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, 400 AD

We all have our favorite Bible verses, don't we? What are yours? I love the 121<sup>st</sup> Psalm:

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills  
Whence cometh my help?  
My help cometh from the LORD  
Who made heaven and earth.*

That's the King James Version. Romans 8, particularly verses 35-37 mean a lot to me too:

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ Jesus? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

There are other passages we rarely read, texts and topics that are just as much a part of the holy scripture, but we skip right over them, or rush past them like kids running past a graveyard; verses like 1 John 5:19:

*We know that ... the whole world lies under the power of evil. <sup>i</sup>*

Or 2 Corinthians 11:14:

*Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.*

No one wants to hear that! But at the same time, I'm oddly grateful for these verses. They help explain what I read every time I pick up my phone, or turn on the TV news, or pick up a newspaper: murder and environmental destruction, racism and persecution of minorities, human trafficking, hoarding of resources by the rich, and the suffering of the poor. They remind us that evil is present and real; it exists even in the best of us and in the world God called "good." They also make sense of this seventh petition of the Lord's Prayer, when Jesus teaches us to pray:

*... Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* <sup>ii</sup>

If you would prefer not to think about the reality of evil in this world, I understand. It's the basis of naive superstitions and a whole lot of completely unscientific hooey. Hollywood equates evil to entertainment, but that's more because the entertainment industry doesn't take evil seriously enough. If we have learned anything in this past week, it is that evil exists – it is around us and among us and within us, and we must take it seriously!

Listen to 1 Peter 5: 8

*Keep alert. Your adversary is like a roaring lion prowling around looking for someone to devour.*

Jesus taught us to pray *Deliver us* and *Save us* from evil. Those are crisis words. We are in the midst of a cosmic struggle. At this point in the Lord's Prayer the temperature rises, and we realize what we must have known all along, that things are not right in this world. Something is working in an organized way against the purposes of God. <sup>iii</sup>

Albert Curry Winn, the former moderator of our Presbyterian General Assembly, said this:

*"There is at work in the world another will, a will that resists and struggles against the will of God. This will is cunning. It wears a thousand disguises. It is purposive and intelligent ... combining our sinful wills into a vast network of evil ... far greater than the sum of its ... parts."* <sup>iv</sup>

Evil has many names. Call it Satan, the devil, Beelzebul or the enemy. Luther named evil The Prince of Darkness.

If it were not for the saving work of Jesus we would have little power over evil. But Jesus went head to head with evil. He took in his body the very worst that evil had to offer, and rose in triumph. He is here! And we are here to declare, as the song says:

*"This is my Father's world.  
The battle is not done.  
Jesus who died  
Will be satisfied,  
And earth and heaven will be one."* <sup>v</sup>

There is a time coming when the terrible battle between good and evil will be done. A time is coming when evil will be fully subdued, and the will of God will reign on earth, as it is in heaven. We're not there yet, are we? In the months after 9/11 the congregation I served in Florida sang a verse every Sunday:

“This is my Father’s world  
Oh let me n’er forget  
that though the wrong  
seems oft so strong  
God is the ruler yet.”<sup>vi</sup>

God IS the ruler yet. We are not Cosmic Dualists, like the ancient Gnostics. Our faith does not claim that God is in any way threatened or limited by evil’s power. Christianity claims that God is all-mighty, perfect and all powerful. In Bethlehem God began the work of redeeming this world that will one day culminate in an eternal reign of peace. *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* We wouldn’t need to pray for it, if the Kingdom were already here.

You and I must live in the in-between time. So heads up! Keep alert, the adversary is prowling, like a hungry lion looking for someone to devour.

What are you going to do? Sit here and be evil’s lunch? The target? The apostle Paul thinks not. When Paul takes hold of a good metaphor he doesn’t let it go. The military images here work well in the midst of the present crisis. We are at war, Paul says, at war with the *principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.* That’s the King James Version of Ephesians 6:12. Here’s the whole passage from Ephesians 6:10-17 in the New Revised Standard Version:

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*

*Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Father, thank you. You never ask us to do anything without equipping us. You give us the gifts of truth and righteousness, faith and the gospel of peace, salvation and, most of all, Mighty God

we praise you for the gift of the Holy Spirit who is the very presence of Christ among us. Guide and empower your people. Make us bold in our faith, able to stand firm in difficult times, always praying “Come, Lord Jesus.” Amen.

Like a lot of kids, 6-year-old Johnny went to stay with his grandmother in the summer. On the day he arrived, his grandmother told him that the pastor would be coming for lunch the following Sunday; he needed to be ready.

“When the pastor asks you your name, what will you say?”

“Johnny Jones,” the little guy replied.

“How old are you?”

“Six years old.”

“Where do bad people go?”

“They go to hell.”

Grandmother said, “That’s good Johnny, and by all means remember, don’t talk too much.”

The next day was Sunday. As they are getting ready for church Johnny’s grandmother said:

“When the pastor asks you your name, what will you say?”

“Johnny Jones.”

“How old are you?”

“Six years old.”

“Where do bad people go?”

“They go to hell.”

“That’s good Johnny, and remember, don’t talk too much.”

Lunchtime came and the pastor arrived. When the doorbell rang Grandmother quickly checked the tablecloth and glasses for spots.

“Okay, Johnny, you can answer the door.” She said.

The pastor came in, and immediately remarked, “Mrs. Jones, what a fine boy you have.” Then turning to Johnny he said, “What’s your name?”

Nervous, Johnny answered: “My name is Johnny Jones. I’m six years old, go to hell and don’t talk too much.”

I heard that one from the Very Reverend Dr. Michael Battle, director of the Desmond Tutu Center for Peace and professor at General Theological Center in New York City. What Dr. Battle meant to say is that every Christian needs to be willing to go to hell for love’s sake. Let me explain.

Kids, I’m not saying a bad word here. I’m talking about an actual place, or more precisely, a state of being where God’s love and power seem absent. Saturday of last week, El Paso was hell and Dayton, Ohio was hell. Before that hell was Gilroy, California, before that Virginia Beach, Highlands Ranch, Colorado, UNC Charlotte, Poway, California, and that only takes you back to April of this year.

*...deliver us from evil.*

Did you see yesterday's cover of *Time* magazine? Those are the places mass shootings have occurred, and we are on the list. The *Capital Gazette* was one year ago. Since then there have been 20 more mass killings. *Time*'s cover article is worth reading. The *Time*'s journalist asked poignantly, "If we cannot call an evil by its name, how can we hope to defeat it?"<sup>vii</sup>

FBI Director Christopher Wray told Congress in July that a majority of the bureau's domestic-terrorism investigations since October were linked to white supremacy.<sup>vii</sup> This, while we are still grieving our neighbors gunned down at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Jesus descended into hell. We announce that every time we say the Apostles' Creed. Dealing with the epidemic of gun violence in our land is going to feel very much like going to hell. These conversations will cause us problems, but we have to go there. We are terrified of the divisions these conversations will cause in our families, in the church, and in the community, but we have to have them. We have to go to hell and not talk too much, at least, until we've really listened to one another.

This is the way that God redeems evil, says Michael Battle. He reminds us of some people of faith who put on the whole armor of God in order to stand against the devil's schemes; people like Martin Luther, Desmond Tutu, and Harry Emerson Fosdick. The hymns for today's service – each one, was written by one of them in the midst of intense national and international crisis; Luther at the time of the reformation, Tutu's in South Africa, and Fosdick's during the rise of Nationalism in Germany in the 1930's.

Others like Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. went to hell for Christ's sake. Not eternally, nobody deserves heaven more than they. But that's not why we remember them. We remember them for their courage, their willingness to go to the places where no one else will go, to overcome evil with good.

You can make your own list. There are plenty of people you know – many we know together, who put on the whole armor of God: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Holy Spirit and the word of God in order to stand against the wiles of the devil. These people are how God answers our prayers. ...*deliver us from evil*... through the plain, difficult courage of people who feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the sick, teach the children, and tell the truth.

In an article in *Christian Century*, Mark Labberton wrote last year about the plain reading of the Bible and its power to upend the structures that allow violence and oppression to continue. This, he said, is how those principalities and powers of this world will finally be overcome by the word of God – one courageous person at a time, one courageous church at a time, one courageous community at a time.



A few years ago Mark visited northern Uganda. The Lord's Resistance Army -- a murderous militia led by Africa's equivalent to cult-leader David Koresh, was still at its evil games -- including murder, human trafficking, forced conscription of children and more. To defend themselves the children slept in "night commuter" camps to avoid being captured and tortured into becoming child soldiers.

This night, as every night, hundreds of children came to sleep together on the dirt floor of an empty school. Only one adult was stationed there -- a middle-aged woman available to help and comfort the children. She explained that she came each night as a volunteer. She and Mark talked, and eventually he asked her why she was doing this. She talked about the children's need and her desire to do what she could under such difficult circumstances, and in the face of such fears.

Still wanting to know more, he pressed, "But what motivates you to care? Why do you put yourself in this situation?" She looked him up and down trying to decide if he was a believer.

"Well, you see," she said slowly, "I am what you call a Christian. I read the Bible ... and every week I go to a church where we eat something called the Lord's Supper. I can't read the Bible every day and share in that meal and not come here at night."<sup>viii</sup>

This is how God will answer our prayer... in the ordinary sacrifice of courageous people. It is love that will finally overcome hate. *Our Father who art in heaven... deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> 1 John 5:19

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 6:9a, 13b

<sup>iii</sup> William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauwerwas, *The Lord's Prayer: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, Abingdon, 1996, 88.

<sup>iv</sup> Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed and the Commandments*, Westminster/John Knox, 1980, 72

<sup>v</sup> Maltbie D. Babcock, "This Is My Father's World" 1901, *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, 370

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>viii</sup> Mark Labberton, "The plain, difficult sense of Scripture," *The Christian Century*, March 30, 2017.