

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”
Romans 7:15-20, 8:26-27; Matthew 6:9-13
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 7, 2010

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Or as the line is translated in the New Revised Standard Version, “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

I must tell you at the outset of this sermon that this line bristles with issues of translation and interpretation. What is the “time of trial” that Jesus had in mind? In the prayer, was he referring to the daily temptations of the Christian life or was his speech eschatological, referring to the humongous book of Revelation-scaled vision of the end of all time? (1)

And then there is the whole matter of whether or not God *leads* us into temptation or *brings* us to a time of trial. The Greek from which the English translation comes would seem to say so, but Aramaic scholar Neil Douglas-Klotz, in writing about the Aramaic words which Jesus himself would have presumably used in praying, says that the meaning is more properly understood as “don’t let us enter” or “don’t let us be seduced by.” (2)

I’m not a Greek or an Aramaic scholar, and so I simply cannot judge on scholarly grounds which is the correct interpretation. What I can say is that to be human is to face temptation. (3) Paul says it as well as anyone can, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” (Romans 7: 15, 18a) With Paul, with the writer of Hebrews who called us to worship this morning (Hebrews 4: 14-16), speaking of Jesus’ being tempted as we are, what I can say is that to be human is to be tempted.

And what I can also say is that when the words, “Lead us not into temptation” or “do not bring us from the time of trial” are laid alongside the words “deliver us” or “rescue us” from evil, there is a pulsating urgency which throbs in the petition. Words like “trial” and “rescue” and “deliver” are words that refer to crisis. (4)

“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,” is a prayer to be uttered in times of crisis. In other words, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” is a prayer for our own time.

Is there anybody here who doesn’t feel that we are in the midst of crisis? When we began this series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer, Haiti was merely a poor country, not the weeping wound oozing human suffering which it is today. When we began this series of sermons, we could have done a survey of the Toyota owners in this room, and leading many lists of reasons for purchasing their automobile would have been safety. Now, as one Toyota owner who was sitting in our Gathering Around the Word discussion the other night confessed, a sickening flutter of fear flaps its wings inside of her whenever she gets behind the wheel even though her

logic tells her that she is overreacting. Add this to the economy, war, frustrations and anxieties with our political process, not to mention the pain and loss and uncertainty that may be bouncing off the walls of many of our own homes, does it not seem that crisis is floating nervously in the atmosphere like the dust motes that tumble haphazardly in the rays of the late afternoon sunlight?

And what then is the temptation, the evil from which we are praying to be delivered in a time of crisis such as this? Are we praying to be delivered from crisis, or are we praying for something else?

Several years ago, I attended a conference which was for churches who were seeking to do a better job at ministry during the time of bereavement. One of the presenters told a story about a young girl who was a dancer. She had an important performance which was scheduled, and her father, wanting not to miss the performance, boarded a plane to head home so that he could arrive in time to see the curtain rise onstage. The plane crashed. The dad was killed. And one night sometime later, the daughter walked in on her mother, and the mother was crying, and then the daughter got hysterical, and that led to a long and even scary night of emotion for the two of them. The next day after the sun had risen; the mother began to talk to the daughter again. The mother asked, "How can I help?" And the daughter said, "Just don't cry anymore." And the daughter imposed the same discipline on herself. She stopped crying. Every ounce of energy that she possessed went into staunching that grief and holding it in. She became a "control freak," and since she was a dancer, control metastasized into anorexia and anorexia into alcohol abuse and alcohol abuse into the use of illegal drugs.

The story came to mind as I pondered what we are really praying for when we say "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." And it also occurred to me that what we are really praying for is not that crisis will be removed from us, but rather that in the midst of crisis we will be granted the grace to surrender to God our illusions of control, illusions that can make us sick. And it also occurred to me what a tremendous gift this prayer is for us. When the spirit enables us to pray the prayer, praying with us in our weakness, in our crisis, whether it is in our beds at night or when we get behind the wheels of our cars or when we lose a job or when we sit down to take an exam or when we rest in a sanctuary (that is, a place of refuge and safety), and taste both crisis and salvation as bread and juice upon our tongues, we are being given a gift, the gift of surrendering our fear and even the crisis itself to God. When we pray that God, not we, will "save" us, "rescue" us, "deliver" us, our prayer is already being answered. We are, in fact, in that very moment of our praying being released from temptation, the temptation to believe that by holding onto our fear and our pain that we have the power to save ourselves. In our praying, and in the Spirit's praying with us, as Paul says, God is already at work wresting away that awful sick power that we can make ourselves even sicker by holding onto. That power, God says that you have been seduced into thinking that you possess; it is not your power in the first place. It is my power. It is the power of my love for you, and in my love, you are safe, God says. Release your fear to me. Release the crisis to me. In your releasing it to me, you are being saved. You are being delivered. You are being rescued. You are being healed.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver...rescue us...save us from evil."

So Jesus teaches us to pray.

1. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 72.
2. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 35.
3. Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 70.
4. William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 88.