

**“The Lord’s Prayer Part 5:
And Lead Us Not into Temptation, but Deliver Us from Evil”**
By Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2021
Based upon Matthew 26:36-46; Romans 8:31-39

You have been to the Garden of Gethsemane before in this Lenten season via Mark’s Gospel. Today, we are there again by way of Matthew’s Gospel. And you will return to the Garden of Gethsemane once again during Holy Week. In our haste for spring’s arrival after a long pandemic winter and the anticipation of the Easter celebration, we don’t linger too long in places like the Garden of Gethsemane. It’s not an easy place to be. It certainly wasn’t for Jesus which is why we should probably stay awhile longer. You were reminded a few weeks ago that in his anguish, when things just didn’t seem to make sense, when the hours ahead were sure to be even more agonizing, Jesus did not turn away and renounce God. What would we have done if such a tribulation and trial had faced us?

There was a whirlpool of evil swirling about that didn’t just begin with that evening: events and crowds, judgments and fear out to destroy all that Jesus had stood for. Would his faithful followers, even as they are sleeping while he is in the garden, be able to stand up to the trials and tribulations that would surely confront them if they were to continue his ministry? Or would they be sucked in and pulled down by the quagmire of forces that resist what is good. Will it just be easier to not resist the perpetrators and to justify compromise with the powers that are against what God is doing in the world?

The biblical scholar N.T. Wright writes that the Garden of Gethsemane suggests the deepest meaning of the petition, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Why is this so? The translation from the Greek to the English of “Lead us not into temptation” gives us an example of what is called a textual variation. What that means is that there may be more than one way to translate this passage and a decision about translation could nuance the meaning.

Biblical scholars who have studied The Lord’s Prayer have engaged in interpretative uncertainties when they come to this particular petition trying to discern what Jesus meant and why he placed this petition in the prayer. “Do not lead us” is a clear translation. But, the Greek word “peirasmon” often translated as temptation can also mean “trial, test, or tribulation.” But, aren’t trials and tests, temptations and tribulations just part of living?

In life, as well as examples given in our scriptures, tests, trials, temptations, and tribulations are not necessarily bad or events that should or can be avoided. Being tested often helps us discover our strengths, our effectiveness. Challenges that involve testing and trial can even boost our confidence in good ways. But this is not what Jesus was referencing when he gave this petition to his disciples as shown in the second part of this petition, “Deliver us from evil?” This plea suggests the reality that there will be occasions when we are lured into things serious and dangerous, inducements into evil.

The focus of temptation in this petition has nothing to do with chocolate or a side trip to Krispy Kreme or a skipped work-out in favor of Netflix. It's turning against God and God's intentions. This allurements and enticement are more powerful than we care to admit. Jesus knows this and has faced these trials throughout his life, even on the last night of his life in the Garden of Gethsemane, even on the cross as passers-by mocked him, "He saved others, but he can't himself. Let him come down from the cross and save himself. Then we will believe."

The awkwardness of this petition begs the question, "Well, is it God that leads us down this road and purposely plops us in the middle of trials and tribulations?" The answer is "No!" The New Testament is very hesitant to ever claim that God intentionally leads mortals into inordinate trials. The interpretive uncertainty over this petition and the suggestion that God leads us directly into temptation even caused Pope Francis in December 2017, to declare that "Lead us not into temptation" is not a good translation. The pope commended the worldwide use of "Do not let us fall into temptation." Others have suggested: "Save us from the time of trial;" "Lead us away from forsaking you;" "Lead us away from those perils that test your patience to the breaking point and induce us to renounce you all together;" "Don't let us be brought into hardships that we cannot bear;" and "Bring us not into the power of sin."

Granted some of these take more translation license than others, but the point is that in traveling the journey of faith, trials, temptations, and tribulation that could result in our turning against God just happen and we might be quite weak in our resistance. Our spiritual journey of faith is not a path where one side of the path is clearly evil, and the other side is clearly good. That's part of evil's power. It can disguise itself.

We cannot pray The Lord's Prayer and especially this petition from a safe distance. Doing the work of God will lead us into places where at times, it will just seem easier and safer for the moment to turn our backs on God and go with the charismatic corruption into what is NOT God. Evil has that power. The devil can be very clever. So, we pray, "Lead us not into temptation. Save us from going where we might renounce you, God." And "Deliver us from ton ponerou, the evil one." And "Rescue us from evil."

According to biblical scholar N.T. Wright, evil is a potent force opposed to God's creation and the human being made in God's image to whom God desires to put in authority over the world for the purpose of doing God's will. As *Psalms* 8 declares "What are human beings, God, that you are so mindful of them. Mortals that you care for them? You have crowned them with glory and honor and given them dominion over the good works of your creation." Evil opposes this! Whether you choose to personify evil and call it "Satan," "The Devil," "The Evil One," or name it as a powerful oppositional force, it is real. And we'd rather not deal with it. So, at times, we don't.

Clifton Black and N.T. Wright suggest that there are three ways that we attempt to get out of acknowledging evil's reality. **The first is DENIAL.** Again, this week the headlines told the true story of a violent shooting in Atlanta, perhaps racially profiled. In the Church of the Gun where the answer, some think, are more guns, the result is that we now skim the headlines of another day of mass shootings before flipping to the sport's page. We may be outraged for a few hours, but then we move on. That makes as much sense as saying "that when the house is on fire, yes, it's getting a little warm, but if we just take off a few layers and get some ice water, we'll be fine tomorrow." It's the head in the sand approach.

But the Christian faith does not deny that evil exists. To pretend otherwise, not only turns a blind eye to the world as we know it, but it also evacuates the necessity of the Gospel. In the cross, God has seriously and radically dealt with evil with the message that although powerful, it will NOT have the final word and people can indeed be rescued from evil. To deny evil makes us even more vulnerable for getting sucked into the morass of destruction, dehumanization, and anti-creation. Because the evil one can be very sneaky, preys on our wrongful desires, and before we know it, we've been drawn into its clutches. The power of evil can be covert, but in no way are we excused us from accountability.

A family member called me a few weeks ago and told me about a book that I just had to read. It's written for youth and young adult readers. It's called "D." The author is Michael Faber. It's about a time when the letter "D" was eliminated from the alphabet. At first, I took this rather personally, but then realized that her point was not that I should be eliminated.

The plot involves a totalitarian autocrat known as the Gamp who has come into power and decides that everything associated with "D" has to be eliminated. It's intriguing and frightening how he gets the people to agree to eliminate the "Ds." It doesn't happen overnight, but his followers come to idolize him and all the decisions he makes that work against goodness and trust and community. There are no longer dogs or daisies or daffodils or delectable dishes or dinners or doctors or Dotties or Davids or Daniels. And it isn't just the things that began with "D." It's anything that had a "d" in it, so language becomes almost incommunicable and of course the leader is happy about that. People can't process with each other.

So, this young girl named Dhikilo whose friends called her Dickey, except now they called her "Ickey" because there are no longer "Ds," is sent on a quest by an old, wise, and eccentric professor who used to teach history at her school and has seen and studied what happens in history when evil rears its ugly head. Dhikilo has to rescue the "Ds." Her companion in this pursuit is a strange, but endearing creature who is part sphinx and part Labrador. Dhikilo is told that it is a dangerous mission. She might not make it. She might not be able to resist the forces. She will be lured and enticed. She will face trial, tribulation, and testing, and the power of the Gamp is real. But the world must get the "Ds" back.

Needless to say, there are a lot of adventures and dangers... and sadness as she discovers that the elimination of something so essential has left the world a lifeless, hopeless, and gloomy place. Dhikilo continues to despise and resist the evil forces (not alone-she has help) and eventually rescues the “Ds,” and she herself is rescued from the sentence of death that the Gamp had unilaterally imposed on her. Before she escapes, however, she will face this perpetrator. And she does! “You’re a dictator, a dreadful, dirty dictator. You’re domineering, despicable, deplorable, dishonest, a despot. You’re a deceiver, disgusting, disgraceful. You have no dignity and are derelict in duty.” She pulled out every “D” word she could think of. She was in his face with the “Ds.” The Gamp being the coward that he really is flees to wherever it is defeated dictators go. For now, goodness is restored, and she has shut the mouth of evil.

Just as Jesus did that time after his baptism when he meant the devil in the wilderness who preyed on Jesus’ hunger and vulnerability to entice Jesus to forsake God, Jesus shut the mouth of evil. Just as he did in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said to the Father, “Not mine, but your will be done.” Just as he did on the cross when he refused to come down. Evil is real. Its mouth can be shut!

The next method we use to get out of accepting evil’s reality is **DISPLACEMENT**. Fear is what so often camouflages evil. I am not purporting that we should never be fearful. We want to be able to protect what is good. I understand why a black boy is fearful of walking home at night eating a package of skittles. But making him be afraid has its very roots in fear.

I remind us how often the visitation of God in the Bible begins with the greeting, “Fear not.” And I do believe Franklin D. Roosevelt’s words, “We have nothing to fear, but fear itself,” is worth serious consideration. Fear often masks evil. A colleague spoke of the January 6th insurrection and said, “I saw a crowd of people besieged with fear. The fear that something rightfully theirs was going to be lost, their status, their privilege, their dominance.” When misfortunes befall us, why are we sometimes so quick to point the finger of blame at certain groups of people? Fear often masks evil.

Some of you may have read C.S. Lewis’ ‘The Screwtape Letters,’ in which a senior demon named Screwtape writes letters to his nephew, a younger and less experienced demon on how to guide someone to worship “Our father below,” tempting one into wicked and deplorable sins. Screwtape writes to his nephew: “Increase the fear, that’s the main point. Keep running in his mind the things he can do or not do within the framework. Make it sound like he’s doing his duty, that his actions will ensure his own safety. Keep him honeycombed into unconscious reservations about God and courage and get him to the moment of real terror before he even suspects what you are about.” The devil’s therapy is to reroute human beings away from dependence on God into a vain self-reliance, bedazzled by a misplaced sense of duty. Fear is continuously injected into the bloodstream.

The third way that we refuse to acknowledge evil's reality is **SELF RIGHTEOUSNESS**. "I am not like those people. Evil is out there all right, but we are the righteous ones and will leap on our white chargers to take care of things." These self-righteous battles can themselves be another manifestation of evil.

The *Letter of James* in the New Testament says: "Everyone is put to the test by being attracted and seduced by our own wrongful desires." How did those people become those people? Could it ever happen that I might become those people? We all need to be saved from arrogance, pride, and hatred and the awful things they make us do. Jesus knows this struggle, experienced it, and gave us this petition in the gift of The Lord's Prayer. We are not by ourselves in this struggle-right there with us is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In times of weakness and confusion, we may be enticed to turn away from God, but God is ever present to remind us who we are and to turn us back to righteousness and truth. As Paul taught, as far as God is concerned there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. The help we receive from above is stronger than the attack from below. We can inhale the victory of the cross, the hope of the resurrection, and by the power of the Holy Spirit for another moment, another hour, another day hold the line against the forces of destruction that would seek to own us and overpower the world.

Jesus' way is that we recognize the power of evil and its reality and confront it head on with the power of the kingdom announcement, the next petition: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory." For that you must be here next week to hear Elizabeth's sermon on the last petition of The Lord's Prayer. For now, know that the future is God's. Jesus, the strong one has bound the "not as strong" one and will continue to do so because God's faithfulness is great. So, let us pray fervently "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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