

“The Lord’s Prayer: Deliver Us From Evil” Palm/ Sunday EUMC 3-16-08
by the rev. Dr. Kathlyn James texts: *Matthew 6:5-13 & Luke: 19:28-38
[A meditation sandwiched into the dramatized scene of Jesus before Pilate.]

In our series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer, today we come to the line, “Deliver us from evil...” Jesus not only taught his disciples to pray this prayer, he prayed it himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, just a few hours before this scene between himself and Pilate. “Father, let this cup pass from me...**Deliver me from evil.**”

But it didn’t happen that way, did it? **Jesus was not delivered from the evil he hoped to avoid.** Evil came to him, in the form of injustice, suffering, and death...in spite of his prayer. Just as evil and suffering come to all of us, too, in one form or another, at one time or another. Our prayer does not guarantee our protection. The question posed to us today, by the events we recall on Palm Sunday, is: *what then?*

You know, there was a time when I believed that the point of religion was to deliver us from the sufferings of life. I really thought that. I thought that if we loved God and our neighbors and ourselves enough, we could somehow escape evil and transcend suffering. I don’t know how I got that impression. Because I didn’t get it from reading the Bible. And I certainly didn’t get it from studying the life of Jesus.

When you read the gospels, it’s immediately clear that Jesus’ faith in God did *not* deliver him from the tribulations of human existence. He experienced poverty, loss, loneliness, confusion, sorrow, anger, rejection. He lost loved ones to death and disease. He experienced the betrayal of friends, and even the anguish of feeling abandoned by God. Jesus’ faith in God didn’t deliver him from any of these things. In fact, a case could be made that his religious faith made him especially vulnerable to them, leading him *into* suffering, even to execution on a cross.

Suffering and evil are facts of human life. The right faith, the right prayer---even the Lord’s Prayer---will not exempt any of us from them. And yet it is also true that suffering and evil do not have the same effects on all people, and religious faith seems to have something to do with that. Sometimes suffering beats people down, and crushes their spirits. But sometimes suffering seems to strengthen and even ennoble people. We have all known people who, as a result of evil that has been done to them, have become bitter, broken, and mean. But we have also known people who, in the midst of evil, have shone forth the most amazing grace, courage, and compassion. It’s important to set such people before us, and learn from them.

Look at Jesus, in today’s gospel scene. His friends have left him; the religious authorities of his own faith have delivered him up to be sentenced and killed. He stands before Pilate, beaten up and bleeding---from what? His nose? His ears? His clothes are torn; his hands are bound behind his back. Everyone watching this scene knows that here is a man who will probably be dead within twenty-four hours. Jesus is only thirty-three years old. And he knows, too, with dreadful clarity, that nothing is going to save him now.

But look at him, standing there. He is calm, conducting himself with dignity even in the face of utter indignity and impending death. He is silent, but looks the Roman governor steadily in the eye. Pilate doesn't know what to make of this. He is used to prisoners protesting their innocence, or begging for mercy, or hanging their heads in hopeless resignation. This prisoner's bearing is strange and unnerving. But it is also strangely compelling.

Jesus is totally vulnerable as he faces his own death---as vulnerable as any person could be---and yet there is something about him too, that death cannot touch. He is completely at Pilate's mercy---everyone knows that---yet he behaves as if Pilate were *not* the ultimate authority here. There is something stirring and beautiful about Jesus in this scene. One gets the impression, watching him, that here is a person who is truly free.

How can this be? How is it possible that Jesus, in the midst of suffering and evil, seems to grow larger, rather than smaller, before our eyes? How is it that he is not diminished, but even more brilliantly and truly himself? I notice two things that may be helpful to us.

The first is the calm acceptance with which Jesus meets the evil that comes to him.

Now, this is not the same thing as saying that Jesus *wanted* to experience evil, or that he sought suffering out. He prayed, "Let this cup pass from me"; he wanted to avoid it, if he could. Only after hours of prayer, in the garden, did he stand up and go with the guards who came to arrest him---not because he was seeking to suffer, but because he refused to desert the message he had come to proclaim.

There is a subtle difference here, but a crucial one. Jesus kept faith with his best understanding of what life is and who God is, and because he kept faith with what he believed and experienced, he received violent persecution. But his choice was not a choice to suffer, or to place himself in the hands of his enemies. It was a choice to witness for life. It was a choice to maintain integrity. It was a choice to not let even the threat of death sway him from his ministry, or turn him aside from his best sense of what love required.

When Jesus first decided to go to Jerusalem, he knew, as his disciples knew, that he was walking toward his own death. But he chose to witness to life and grace, even knowing that evil would be imposed on him for doing so. Painfully, but determined to remain true to himself and to God, he accepted that. And we who would follow Christ are called to do the same. In that sense, it is true, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "*When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die.*" Because we might as well admit it: we know, from our own experience, that if we commit ourselves to love God and our neighbors, to live with integrity and compassion in this world, we are in for some suffering and evil.

Whenever you commit yourself to anybody, or to anything, for that matter, you make yourself vulnerable to being hurt. That's why the ancient hedonists (you know, those philosophers in ancient Greece who devoted themselves to the avoidance of pain), contrary to what we might imagine---like I would imagine that they spent all their time eating and drinking and being merry---went out and lived like hermits, alone in the

forest. They realized that the only way to avoid suffering is to refuse to care about anything or anyone.

You can't love and avoid suffering and evil. Just to say "I love you" to someone, after you have lived for any length of time in this world and have some sense of what you are saying, is an act of courage. That person to whom you give your heart will, inevitably, hurt you someday---intentionally or unintentionally, by weakness or by malice or simply because when they are hurt, you will hurt along with them. If nothing else, they'll probably die someday, and leave you with a broken heart.

You know weddings are part of my job as a pastor. And in the process of working with couples toward that step I am moved, over and over, by the courage they demonstrate, in committing themselves to one another. Especially those who have been hurt by love in the past, those who have gone through painful divorces, or long illnesses, or stinging betrayals of trust. When these people stand up and say, "in sickness and in health, for better or for worse," it's a tremendous thing. They know what "worse" can be like! They know that hard times are inevitable in any long-term relationship. And knowing that, they choose to love anyway. Like Jesus, they accept the suffering that living, and loving, requires.

Then there's being a parent. I don't know of any form of love, yet, that demands more in terms of commitment, and in which people expose themselves more fully to the potential for pain. This little child comes in to the world, and suddenly...you're a goner. You'd climb the highest mountain, jump into the sea, work two jobs, or three---whatever it takes to make life good for this child. And if it should happen that this child is hurt, or gets sick and dies, or gets into trouble and needs you---well, you'll suffer.

You'll sit at the bedside in the hospital for as long as it takes; you'll let the doctors remove one of your kidneys or bone marrow or whatever is needed; you'll sell the house or march in the streets or go down to the police station or whatever is required by your love for this child. Not because your self-sacrifice is a good thing. Not because God wants you to suffer, or refuses to deliver you from evil. But because you choose to be faithful to life, to love, and to your deepest commitments. That's the kind of suffering that doesn't diminish people, but enlarges them. And that is the acceptance of suffering that you see in Jesus Christ throughout his life, and most clearly of all, at its end.

I notice something else about Jesus in these last scenes of his life. He not only meets the evil that comes to him, accepting it as part of what loving and living faithfully requires. **He also believes, through it all, that his suffering will not have been in vain.** He trusts, without knowing how, that his sufferings can be used to serve God's purposes in the world. And in this affirmation, his suffering takes on transforming power.

It was Simone Weil, the French resistance fighter, who wrote: "*Christian faith does not provide a supernatural remedy for suffering. It can, however, provide a supernatural use for it.*" That is, people can transform even the worst things that happen to them, even the evil of unjust suffering, by turning it in the direction of life.

Almost twenty years ago, now, a woman named Jennifer Cassolo, associated with University Baptist Church, returned to Seattle after being detained in El Salvador for several months. There she had experienced first-hand the suffering and evil going on in that tortured land. I went to hear her speak, and took notes. At one point in her talk, she said this: *“Even in prison, I realized that my own suffering, as an individual, was not what was so important. What was important was the people’s struggle for justice and peace. Even in the midst of torture---though it’s hard to explain this---I felt the joy of participating in that struggle. I felt the joy of having worked for the birth of a new world, God’s new world; and the certainty that my suffering was therefore not in vain.”*

Perhaps you have known people like that. People who, in the midst of suffering and evil, somehow manage to turn their experience into a force for good in this world. To such people, God comes to be seen not as one who is *over us* as an all-powerful being who can manipulate things to protect us, but as one who is *with us* in the process of suffering and becoming and creating. People like that want their sufferings to be joined with God’s activity in this world. They live in the confidence that their experience can be used for purposes greater than themselves, purposes *worth* suffering for, purposes that will go on even after they are dead.

I heard about a teenager named Cliff, at a hospital here in Seattle, who was like that. Cliff had cancer; he went through surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation. The time came when he knew that he didn’t have long to live. You know what he did? He started going, once a week, to a center for the prevention of teen suicide here in Seattle. He listened to other teens talk about their problems. And then at some point Cliff, sitting there with his head bald from chemo, said to them, *“Look at me. My life is almost over. But yours doesn’t have to be. You’ve still got time, years to do things and meet people and feel differently than you feel right now. You really want to throw that away?”*

Do you know people like that? They are more common than we might think. They speak words of forgiveness from their hospital beds; they write letters from behind prison bars; they travel around to schools telling children about their AIDS, and how not to get it; they receive the news that they are dying, and go out and plant bulbs in the garden. Such people show us that it is possible to engage evil in a way that actually leads to blessings, rather than devastation and despair. It is possible to suffer consciously, with the intention that one’s sufferings *be used to serve life*. Here is a spiritual depth that eludes most of us, most of the time. But sometimes we see it, and when we do, it’s like seeing Jesus standing before Pilate: in possession of his own soul, dignified, and beautiful.

In just a few moments, Jesus will be taken away, delivered up to crucifixion and death. Suddenly it occurs to me: could it be that **this is God’s way of delivering us from evil?** Not by keeping evil from happening to us, but by showing us a way of living that evil cannot ultimately defeat? Could it be that this, in fact---this freedom, this strength---is what we are praying for, when we pray our Lord’s Prayer?

[the scripture drama continues and Jesus is taken away]