

Deliver Us

John 16:16-33 and Matthew 6:9-13

Good Morning Church Family. It's wonderful to see you all this morning, and a big hello to those joining us online.

This morning, we're wrapping up our series on The Lord's Prayer, because next Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent! Hard to believe. Ezra, after he'd finished eating his Valentine's Day Chocolates said, "I sure wish it was Easter!" I let him know it was going to be a while yet. The Homemakers will be doing the service next Sunday and I'm looking forward to it.

The final portion of the Lord's Prayer that we'll be unpacking this morning are the lines "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the Kingdom, The Power and the Glory forever and ever, Amen."

As I was mulling over this line of the prayer, I thought about something that Roger had said a few weeks ago during sharing and prayer. He said something to the effect of the "the world seems so angry right now." The people, governments, the planet just seems angry. The war in Ukraine. The question of these UFOs being shot down over Canada and the United States. The devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Even what Mustafa shared on Sunday at the community potluck reminded me that even though

Afghanistan is no longer in the headlines, that doesn't mean the ripple effects of evil aren't still being felt. The world feels caught in the grip of an angry state of mind, an angry state of being that we just can't seem to shake.

The problem of evil, of suffering, of the human capacity to do harm is no new kind of story. I've been listening to a new podcast recently called "How the Women Won World War II." I certainly studied the world wars in high school and heard the stories that my veteran grandfathers shared, but hearing some of the stories in this podcast (which tell the stories of women from all of the allied countries) reminded me that world history has been filled with evil and some really terrible things. What we are experiencing now is not unique, which maybe gives you some comfort or maybe makes you feel worse.

Call it what you like "evil" "sin" "powers of darkness", these terms and their extending consequences are all over the Bible. When Jesus sends his disciples out to minister to the people of Israel through teaching, healing, and casting out demons in Matthew 10, Jesus says this to them, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” Jesus tells them, and by extension tells us too, there is evil in this world and sometimes you will face it. Jesus doesn’t explain it away, doesn’t say don’t worry about it, just names it as a fact. Evil is present, and so I am.

I’ve said as much before, but I’m thankful that Christianity as a religion names and recognizes evil as existing and tells the truth that we are not alright, and the world is not alright. That we need saving from all kinds of evil. The Lord’s prayer also acknowledges this when we pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”

The question that I would like us to explore together for this morning is what should our response be to evil? What does it mean as those who are called to build the kingdom of God, the culture of God, to be delivered from evil. When I was a kid learning to pray the Lord’s prayer, I assumed that “being delivered from evil” meant God would rescue me or keep me safe from “bad” things, danger or trauma. But Jesus tells his own disciple the cruelty and suffering that they will face. So, how do we reconcile the words of this prayer with Jesus’ other teachings?

NT Wright in book “The Lord and His Prayer” proffers three different responses by people of faith to evil. Not that we’re not asking the questions this morning of “why does God allow evil?” which is very real, very important, but we’re starting with the premise

that evil exists and we are responding to it.

The first, he says, is the Head in the Sand approach. Evil is out there, absolutely, but let's circle the wagons. Let's ignore all that is happening out there and instead focus on what's happening in "here." This sort of insular mentality has been something the church has struggled with through its history. When social issues feel too big, or the change required feels too impossible, it can be easy to ignore things, or at least try to.

Martin Luther King Jr., in his beautiful sermon, "Letters from a Birmingham Jail" is scathingly critical of the White moderate. Those who claim to be against racial oppression, but are unwilling to respond. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is considered to be one of the greatest pieces of writing in American history. Many pastors I know say it's one of the most stunning sermons they've ever read. What I only recently learned was what prompted King to write the letter was a letter that was published by eight Clergymen in Birmingham following the peaceful protests by African Americans. The clergy urged the African-American citizens to give up on the demonstrations and return to "common sense" "We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced these demonstrations are unwise and untimely." Clergy failed to recognize the greater evil of racism over the "evil" of civil unrest.

NT Wright says, "You can pretend that evil doesn't really exist, or that, if it does, it doesn't really matter. Yes, we say, people do silly things sometimes, but if we all try a little harder, it'll all work out all right. That's about as much use as saying , when the

house is on fire, that yes, it's getting a little warm, but if we all take off a layer of clothing and drink more iced water things will be just fine."

The second approach, is the mirror image of the first, to wallow in evil and to see it everywhere. Wright says, "Once you realize that there is such a thing a radical evil, and that it's much more powerful than you are, you can either become evil yourself or become paranoid, seeing demons behind every bush." This tends to be the trap that I fall into, feeling like it's nothing but bad news, feeling unable to see beauty, truth, and goodness amidst all the bad. This approach is just as unhelpful as the first.

What I DO think is helpful for us to recognize is our exposure to world events, to "bad news", and evil has changed so completely even in my lifetime. Thanks to the internet and smartphones every news story, every tragedy, every evil can be viewed in our hands in real time. If you stop to think about that, honestly, what a horrible thing that is! We weren't meant to have that sort of warped omniscience. I saw a joke that said, "Can't seem to sleep. Let's see if the bright light of my phone containing all the information in the entire world held inches away from my face for the next 15 minutes manages to lull me into a peaceful slumber." I think, well maybe I know, that mass online media is not good for my soul, all our souls. So when we talk about the Christian response to evil, I think online habits is an emerging conversation. I know some people who set boundaries "I'll only read news headlines in the morning" or an increasingly popular practice is taking a "sabbath" from one's phone. Turning off or locking apps on your phone one day a week. Overconsumption (which looks different for different people) fuels both of these problematic approaches to evil, too much information causes us to disengage, stick our heads in the sand. Too much information can overwhelm us,

consume our ability to see beauty and goodness in this world where God is present and active.

The third approach, says Wright, is that of self-righteousness. “Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other people!” Evil is something real, but I’m not a part of that. In fact, it’s my job to confront evil, to tackle it head on, to clear the way for good to flourish. It turns us into the heroes of the story, rather than the builders of God’s Culture. This view of evil can be a temptation for streams of Christianity that are more active in social justice. This is not to say that we cannot have a real impact on oppressive evils in our world- the civil rights movement in the United States is a prime example. However, the problem with this approach fails to recognize the evil that is within our own hearts - our own capacity for selfishness, desire for power, and the like. Our intentions, however pure they may seem in our minds, can go terribly awry. Look at the church’s role in residential schools.

So, where does this leave us? What approach or understanding of evil can help us to keep things in perspective? The answer is embedded in the Lord’s prayer. “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from Evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, forever and ever, Amen.”

Wright says this, “This prayer, in its setting within the whole Lord’s prayer, keeps the proper balance. Jesus intends his followers to recognize not only the reality of evil, but the reality of his victory over it. We need to examine both sides of this balance. Evil is real and powerful. It is not only ‘out there’ in other people, but it is present and active with each of us. What is more, ‘evil’ is more than the sum total of all evil impulses and actions. When human beings begin to worship that which is not God, they give authority

to forces of destruction and malevolence; that those forces gain a power, collectively, that has, down through the centuries of Christian experience, caused wise people to personify it, to give it the same of Satan, the Accuser. 'The Satan', 'The Evil One' is not equal and opposite to God; but 'he' or 'it' is a potent force, opposed to God's good creation, and particularly to the human beings whom God wishes to put in authority over his world. If all this were not so, the final petition in the Lord's Prayer would be an unnecessary anti-climax.

BUT Jesus' victory over evil is also real and powerful. It, too, is not only 'out there', a fact of history two thousand years ago, but it is available here and now for each of us. Where human beings turn from idolatry and worship the God they see revealed on Calvary, they are turning from darkness to light, from the Strong Man to the one who has bound the Strong Man. To pray 'deliver us from evil' or 'from the evil one', is to inhale the victory of the cross, and thereby hold the line for another moment, another hour, another day, against the forces of destruction in our world.'`

Keeping the "problem of evil in its proper place, enables us to move forward in the truth that "But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world" as it says in 1 John 4:4. When we recognize that Jesus is the victor and we are safe in him, we can build God's Kingdom and Culture here in this world, in this Kingdom and Culture. Not as separate reality, "culture within the walls of the church" versus "culture outside", but as a reality that is part of this world just as Jesus was and is part of this world. We can live in the ways of Jesus, right here and right now, responding to evil just as he did. Not with distance or fear or self-righteousness, but with

tenderness and compassion, with honesty and justice. Jesus delivers us and also equips us.

Friends, as we pray this prayer again this morning together, may the power of Jesus and his love remind you of all that is good, and hold you through all that isn't. Amen.