

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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September 4, 2016

Text: Matthew 6:13

Title: “The Prayer of Jesus: Deliver Us”

Over the last four weeks, we’ve been focusing on Jesus’ prayer which according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Christian communities have been repeating it ever since.

The first Sunday we explored what it means to call God “Abba, Father”, how referring to God as our heavenly Parent is an intimate address that acknowledges that “Abba” knows how to give good gifts to children like you and me and that “Abba” holds for you and me “...thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

When we experience God as “Abba” we don’t need to worry so much. We don’t need to be fearful when we trust that our Heavenly Dad has our back, has our good in mind, even when we fall or fail or get hurt or get lost.

The second week we explored what God’s kingdom is about and discovered that Jesus never clearly defines it in the Gospel accounts, but rather used metaphor, story and parable to talk about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven as the Gospel According to Matthew refers to it. In his parables, Jesus told people once we find it, it’s worth everything we have. Nothing else is more valuable. And though it’s often hidden from human eyes, God is at work whether or not we perceive what’s happening. God’s kingdom is both present here and now but also not completely in the here and now. Yet, it’s always near, ready to break in upon us at any moment.

The third week Pastor Jaye brought the message of God’s provision of our daily bread.

And last week forgiveness was the focus, the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We spent some time on the story of the forgiving king who asked one he forgave, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?” after it was discovered that the servant did not pay forward the forgiveness he himself had received.

In as much as we are able, the parable and the prayer call us to be gracious with one another without offering cheap forgiveness. For all of us have all fallen short of the glory of God. When we are able to offer authentic forgiveness, it frees us too. It frees us from our own anger, our own resentments, our own bitterness. Forgiveness frees us which is why Jesus made it part of his prayer: “Forgive us as we forgive others.”

This morning we conclude the series on the Lord’s Prayer with the request: “and lead us

not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Next Sunday, we will be commemorating the 15th anniversary of the September 11 attacks on the United States. If you attend, I think you’ll find worship that both services at the new times of 8:45 & 11:15 will be moving.

I share what’s coming up next Sunday because talk about delivering us from evil! Right? God, deliver us from evil! Well, it didn’t quite work out that well 15 years ago did it? So in light of such things as 9/11 and other acts of evil that people experience, what does it really mean then to ask God to deliver us from evil? Why would Jesus include this in his principle prayer when it didn’t appear to work for him either? I mean he wound up on a cross after he taught this prayer. What then does it mean to ask God to keep us from temptation and deliver us from evil in a world that expresses the presence of evil all the time?

I can’t tell you how many times over the years I have heard from people how much worse things are in the world than ever before. But then I remember history and think of the early centuries of Christian persecution in which people suffered terrible deaths at the hands of Romans and others. Get in a time machine and go forward a thousand years or so and in that period you would find Crusaders committing horrific crimes against Jews in Europe or a few centuries later during the Spanish Inquisition in which the church murdered people for not confessing as the inquisitors’ required them to do. Get in the time machine again and come to North America and watch women murdered for being accused of witchcraft. Get in the machine again and watch Native Americans massacred at places like Sand Creek and Wounded Knee and other places even as U.S. Soldiers and settlers lost their lives to Native American attacks, at the same time ships traversed the Atlantic between the North America and Africa carrying human cargo who after centuries of captivity were finally freed after a bloody war between brothers and sisters in the north and south. Dial the machine up to the 1900’s and there you will find WWI and the savagery of WWII with genocide practiced systematically in ways never before devised by humankind, and then a bomb was developed that has the power like nothing before or since, enough power to destroy the earth if we are not careful. Move it forward to the 1960’s and scenes of Vietnam and Jim Crow and lynchings by gangs of thugs who liked to burn crosses on the lawns of black Americans.

Friends, evil has been with us for a long time. It goes back to the serpent in the garden, it’s so old and prevalent. Certainly Jesus knew this. Jesus knew the evil that is lurking within human beings and could be launched by anyone who listened to the voice of the evil one.

Yet, Jesus was steeped in a tradition of prayer. And as he teaches his disciples to pray, I wonder if when this prayer of his was taught he reflected on the psalms, like Psalm 121:

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
- ² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
- ³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
- ⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

- ⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
- ⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
- ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
- ⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

The world then and now was filled with dangers and so the psalmist asks the question: “from where will my help come?” It’s a natural enough question, isn’t it? Life is full of many dangers. The physical: disease, injury, accident, war, infirmity, or natural disasters. The economic: recession, depression, unemployment, outsourcing, downsizing, insolvency, debt, or theft. The spiritual: doubt, sin, evil, corruption, extremism, or false teaching. And when we think about that quick list through history I just shared which is only a smattering of life-taking events, when we think about what you and I might be fearful about, what better question to ask: “where am I going to get some help with all this? It’s beyond me, Lord, where can I get some help?”

The psalmist looks to the hills but isn’t asking the hills for help. He is seeking help but not from creation itself. He is not a pantheist in this sense. Instead, the psalmist answers his own question:

2 My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

“My help comes from the Lord”, not you will notice “my help comes from other people, or human institutions, from my government or the confidence my bank balance gives me,” but from “the Lord.”

The psalmist reminds himself that God is his keeper, that God holds his life. It’s a reminder that God is Abba, One who seeks the good of God’s children and not their harm. In the midst of the dangers of life, God will keep you. That’s God’s promise, like a shade on your right hand to keep the scorching desert sun from scorching your life, like a watchman keeping guard over a city as Psalm 130 describes God, or a bird shielding its young in the shelter of his wings as Psalm 91 images God. God promises to keep you.

That doesn’t mean, of course, that those who look to the hills seeking God to protect them will never experience the dangers of the evil one. Life itself has always taught human beings throughout history that bad things happen to good people for no apparent reason. Troubles come to every human being. The difference is that those who look to the hills, those who trust their lives to God and know God’s unsearchable and incomprehensible grace, find reserves of strength that do not come from human sources, do not come from any government or

even a church program, do not come from intellectual sources. Those who trust God with their lives find the kind of strength and power that only God can give.

So when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray “deliver us from the evil one”, he teaches them to rely on the One who has the power of heaven and earth, not to keep us from ever being hurt but to give us the strength that only God can give. Jesus, whose resurrection reflects the goodness of the One who made heaven and earth and that in spite of all the evil expressions of the human will in every time, God and God alone—our Abba—calls us, invites us, to trust so completely that even when evil does come to us, we know that God has got this, our Keeper has our backs, in this life and the next.

So when we pray this morning, “Abba, deliver us from evil”, do you trust that God will deliver? Do you trust that though we will witness evil in the world because it has always found an expression in some person or force, that ultimately God has got this?

Later in Matthew’s Gospel in chapter 28, Jesus is resurrected. The disciples head back to Galilee to the mountains to which Jesus had direct them, according to Matthew. This is Jesus’ sendoff taking place on the same mountains I can’t help but wonder may have been the same mountains to which the psalmist looked up for help. He gave them there the great commission:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

“I am with you always, to the end of the age.” When we are able to trust Christ is present always, then evil has no hold and we are free. That’s why we pray the Lord’s Prayer every week. We pray to remember the Lord is with us. We pray to remember that though the forces of evil are often beyond our control, the Creator of Heaven and Earth has ultimate authority. We pray to remember we are not God and that we need God beyond our feeble strength. We pray to remember we are children of the Heavenly Parent who has our good at heart.