

*Palm/Passion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, April 17, 2011, dedicated to William James Holton, born on April 14, 2011, and to his parents Jason and Christen and sister Audrey, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Deliver Us from Evil”**

**Matthew 6:13b**

**(Part VII of VIII in the sermon series  
“The Lord’s Prayer”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Evil was headline news in this morning’s *Columbus Dispatch*. The headline reads, **Triple Murder, Why Did Littleton Kill? Evil, He Says**. The story tells of Sammy Littleton who murdered three people from Bellefontaine, Ohio, - 26-year- old Tiffany Brown and Dick and Gladys Russell, a couple in their 80s. In a videotaped confession, Littleton tells officers over and over again, “*I think evil thoughts all the time. . . .Why would a person have those kind of thoughts all the time? I mean, why. . . . I am a bad, bad person.*” (*Columbus Dispatch*, by Holly Zachariah, Section A, Page 1, Sunday, April 17, 2011). Not one of us could easily challenge Sammy Littleton’s self-assessment. All of us could add our condemnation.

Psychologist M. Scott Peck wrote a book entitled, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. Peck contends that evil people are real and they are easy to hate and fear.

But, he continues, the challenge of our time is to heal human evil and the only way to do that is to face it directly. It is, in Peck's words, not as far from each of us as we would like to believe. He offers a simple definition of evil, one which we will see, is not far off from the root of the words Jesus used.

Dr. Peck describes evil as *“that force residing inside or outside of human beings that seeks to kill life or liveliness. Goodness is its opposite. Goodness is that which promotes life and liveliness.”* (M.S. Peck, *People of the Lie*, Touchstone Books, New York, N.Y., 1983, p. 43). Evil is that which kills life and liveliness.

With this definition, Scott Peck brings evil closer to us than the brutality and hate-filled actions of Sammy Littleton. It is a closeness that Jesus himself addresses in the Lord's Prayer. At the end of his prayer, Jesus calls out to his father, *“Ela patzan min bisha, “**Deliver us from evil.**”* Here in Aramaic, “evil” is best translated “unripeness” or “inappropriate action.” Jesus is asking his daddy (Abba) to deliver his followers from that which diverts their attention, that which keeps them from advancing, that which keeps them from doing the right action at the right time.

Closer still, I wonder, what is it that you and I do that is not fruitful? What is it that is our inappropriate action? What do you do that diverts your attention from goodness, that keeps you from advancing, that keeps you from doing the right action at the right time? From THAT presence - the one that creates fruitless lives and inappropriate actions - Jesus prays we are ALL delivered. *“Ela patzan min bisha.”*

In his little book, *The Lord's Prayer*, Catholic priest and liberation Theologian Leonardo Boff writes that the evil of our times from which we need to be delivered is extreme individualism and a lack of compassion. We have become narcissistic in our economic drives that create a sense of personal entitlement and collective selfishness. With such erosion of our connections to others and our need to care for

them, Boff says we shouldn't be surprised when evil in the form of violence and apathy deliver people into its control. Father Boff writes:

*Each generation has its own 'evil one' against which it must particularly protect itself and because of which it must implore divine protection. This evil being embodies the widespread wickedness that permeates humanity. . . . When 2/3's of the world's population are held prisoner under a legion of demons: hunger, sickness, disintegration of the family, shortage of housing, schools, and hospitals . . . (the evil one has taken hold and will not let go)"* But, the evil one looks a lot like people we know. (L. Boff, *The Lord's Prayer*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 1975, p. 119)

Looking out on the faces of his own time, Jesus saw this presence. He had been tormented by the Evil One while fasting in the wilderness. He was assaulted by the Evil One every time he tried to deliver people from sickness and death. In this week we call holy, Jesus would face evil beyond belief. As he taught his beloved community to pray, he knew what they faced. He knows what we face. The force from which we need to be delivered, the one which keeps us from doing good, the one which keeps us away from one another is a force whose hold on humanity must be broken. His final appeal to God in this prayer he has granted us reverberated through Palestine and shakes the earth to this day. "*Ela patzan min bisha.*"

We have entered the week that is called *transitus*. From Latin, *transitus* means the movement from one place to another. Our Holy Week rituals will move us from the festive songs and celebrations of Palm Sunday, to the Passover Seder and prayerful loneliness of Maundy Thursday, to the Passion of Christ on Good Friday, to the silence of the tomb on Holy Saturday and to Christ's glorious resurrection on Easter.

At the center of this *transitus*, we find our Lord battling with demons and humans while being ministered to by angels and humans. He needs deliverance from evil. He needs God

to hear and answer his prayer. Yet, it is the silence of God and the inappropriate action of humanity that will hold together this week in great dis-ease. - whose silence is finally broken by the glory of next week's rising.

All of this said, we must acknowledge and face the presence of evil in our times (and in every time) for it is truly that which keeps us from doing good. Remember, the word "Satan" simply translates "the one who trips us," "the one who causes us to stumble and fall." If we do not deal with that which trips us, the power of darkness will grow and we will be dealt with on different terms. We will find ourselves lying face down with no way to rise again.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and author, Elie Wiesel, spent part of his early teenage years engulfed by the presence of evil that had spread like a cancer over the land of Germany and throughout the world. He was a Jew in Auschwitz, a concentration camp of Nazi Germany and the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler.

As Passover begins tomorrow night at sunset, and as we live with the tension of evil in our times, I give you his story, one which should hold us in the tension held in this week, a week for the Jewish Passover and our Christian Holy Week. Young Wiesel tells this story in his book *Night*:

*The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp today. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour.*

*'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the nooses after a long time, I heard the man call again., 'Where is God now?'*

*And I heard a voice in myself answer, 'Where is God? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows before us.'*

***Ela patzan min bisha***

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