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Larkspur, California
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Psalm 1; John 17:6-19
"Jesus Prays for Us"

The Gospel reading today is John 17:6-19. Jesus prays what has come to be called his high priestly prayer. It's the entire chapter. We pick up the prayer near its beginning. Jesus prays to God on behalf of his followers, in other words, Jesus prays for us.

Addressing God, he says:

⁶"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

A friend painted this amazing picture with verse nine of this text quoted on the body of Jesus. He gave the painting to our family as a gift. It hangs besides the door in my office. When I leave my office I often look at the words: "I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine." That's the King James Version. It's the attitude I take in my relationship with the communities I serve. "I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine."

I pray for the world as we all do but there is a time like Jesus when my/our prayers are concentrated on the church as Jesus concentrates his prayer on his followers.

He continues:

¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

This prayer was said at the end of Jesus' ministry. He knew he would soon die. He had nurtured his followers. He so concentrated their minds on his teaching and way of life that there was no room or time to be tempted by the destructive forces of the world. He protected and guarded them so they would not get lost. But now he was leaving them and he prays that God will continue to protect them. The one destined to be lost was Judas Iscariot. It's difficult to understand how one is "destined" to be lost.

Jesus then prays for joy. The beginning of faith is joy.

¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

He then turns to the serious task of living in the world. The world is a wonderful yet dangerous place. We need the best of heaven to protect and guide us.

He prays:

¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

This sounds very strange because we *do* belong to the world. Where have we been all week? Jesus provides a clue to his intent. The world he refers to is the one where the “evil one” resides and Jesus asks God to protect us from this evil one.

In many ways, Jesus is apocalyptic, in other words, he thinks in terms of good and evil and that life is a battle between these forces. One is either on the side of good or evil. This thinking is dualistic; which is not necessarily our thinking in the twenty-first century.

However, we learn from Jesus about how we can live and we filter his words through current understandings. It is difficult to know who or what the so-called “evil one” is and how this is expressed in life.

Christian psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck, says the problem of evil is a very big mystery; we end up with more questions than answers. He says everyone sins but we must draw a distinction between evil and ordinary sin. It is not their sins per se that characterize evil people, rather it is the subtlety and persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of the evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it. It's sinning without a conscience.

One finds this in psychopaths or sociopaths who commit crimes with reckless abandon and in persons who seem to lack any motivation to *be* good; they intensely desire to appear good. They are utterly dedicated to preserving their self-image of perfection; they are unceasingly engaged in the effort to maintain the appearance of moral purity. Rather than blissfully lacking a sense of morality, like the psychopath, they are continually engaged in sweeping the evidence of their evil under the rug of their own conscience.

Jesus asks God to protect us from these folk. We wish they did not exist but they do. We pray for them and ourselves and work for a better society. We work for a better justice system. We oppose evil with force if necessary but that's the last resort. We also protect ourselves by praying like Jesus and removing ourselves from the presence of evil the best we can.

If we want an example of the worst kind of evil in a person we look at the Serbian Commander of the Bosnian forces, General Ratko Mladic, who stood accused of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity at the U.N. war crimes tribunal in The Hague this week.

He oversaw Europe's worst massacre since World War II; including the slaughter of about 8,000 Muslims in the enclave of Srebrenica and other atrocities of the 1992-95 Bosnian war. The Chronicle named his two natures as sly deceiver and ranting bully. He taunted families of the murdered who attended the trial this week.

Jesus' prayer is answered in the justice of such trials. Many people globally have been killed and harmed by such persons and supporting forces. One hopes for protection before the fact and our work for peace and justice enables that to happen. We are protected by the "evil ones" in what we do to prevent them or stop them from unleashing themselves in the world. Jesus' prayer is answered by our prayer and action.

Finally, Psychologist Carl Jung and Christian scholar Morton Kelsey posit strongly the understanding of evil as the shadow that touches every human being. We work to integrate the shadow in ourselves so we do not become the evil we deplore.

The gospel reading today ends with Jesus praying:

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

God calls us to be Christ's persons in every sphere of life. Jesus wants us to be in the world and to be protected from the "evil one." In the midst of it all and in our challenging yet beautiful world God calls us to live joyful, holy and wholesome lives. We can do that with Jesus praying for us and with our prayers and caring for each other and the world. Amen.

Bibliography

Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature. Edited by Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin: New York, 1991. Part 7. Devils, Demons, and Scapegoats: A Psychology of Evil