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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
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Colossians 4:2-6; Psalm 107:1-9; Matthew 6:7-13
 "Sermon Meditation on the Lord's Prayer – Part 3"

The sermon today is a meditation on the Lord's Prayer. It is the third and final sermon in a series. Most of the insights are drawn from Marjorie Suchocki's book *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer*.

We have reflected on the first two-thirds of the prayer as written in Matthew (we've used Suchocki's words): "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive the trespasses against us."

Today we meditate on the last two petitions: "...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I'll comment at the end on the extra-biblical line: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

I shall read each petition one at a time, pause and repeat the reading and pause again for half a minute for meditation and then offer thoughts on the line – primarily Suchocki's thoughts.

Since the last two sermons in the series had a fair amount of introductory material which can be read on the church's website I will jump straight into the first petition:

...lead us not into temptation (x2)

[Silence]

Lead us not into temptation. Has it seemed strange to you why such a petition would be included? Would we even think God could or would tempt us in ways that are against our good? The petition seems strange, especially when it follows the petition for forgiveness, and yet this may be the clue to its meaning.

Jesus spoke a parable in Matthew 12 in which an "unclean spirit" is cast from a person; the spirit wanders, seeking a resting place, but finds none. Returning then to its original home, it finds the person now well-swept and orderly, but empty. And so the spirit not only takes up residence again, but brings along seven other unclean spirits.

Forgiveness is a release from that which hinders us, whether that hindrance be our own violation of others or our own refusal to look to the good of those who have violated us. In a sense, forgiveness "empties" us so that we may then be "filled" with the fruits that follow forgiveness, which are attitudes and actions of goodwill.

As a rule I have a cup of coffee in the morning – just in the morning. One day last week I had a cup of coffee late in the afternoon and had quite a high. I asked Suellen what that was about and she said: “Addiction.” I am generally clean in the afternoon and when a cup came my way it hit me. I imagined what it is like for an alcoholic or drug addict. They say in AA and NA that your next drink or substance of choice could be your last. It happened to a member of an AA/NA group I knew in one of the churches I served. The man was clean and sober and went out and overdosed and died.

Can we not understand the petition, “Lead us not into temptation,” as a request that we not remain empty, but that our ill will shall be replaced with good? God is the one who faithfully gives us impulses toward our good; we pray that through our receiving and giving of forgiveness, we shall be led not in the same paths of our old ways, but in new paths, sober and strong enough to keep us in God’s good pleasure.

We now move to the final petition:

“...deliver from evil.” (x2)

[Silence]

Deliver us from evil. We pray it daily, and too often we – or those we love – do not seem to be delivered from evil. There are terminal illnesses, there are dreadful accidents, and there is the horror of violence against ourselves and those we love through warfare or criminal activity.

Deliver us from evil. In our fragility and mortality, there is evil enough. But the prayer seems to recognize this, and its request is not that we shall not experience evil, but that we shall be delivered. In a sense this is to ask that we might live in the resurrection power of God, who is able to work transformation in every evil.

There is no evil that God’s love for us cannot overcome, for the very nature of God’s leading in every moment contains not only the power of endurance, but also the power of transformation. The transformation will be suited to the circumstances.

The evil we encounter is seldom erased from our experience, but we can be transformed from evil’s devastation.

I’m not entirely sure what Suchocki is saying here because there are terrible consequences of evil. We don’t want to sound like Pollyanna. Think of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan vets who have lost limbs and travel in wheelchairs for the rest of their lives. Think of babies born with deformities as a result of their mother’s infection with depleted uranium. Perhaps we are delivered the best way possible with a faith that keeps our spirits up no matter the circumstances and helps us fight the evils of the world.

Undoubtedly, in most if not all ways it would be better if our various crucifixions simply did not occur! Better to be preserved from transformations that come about at so high a price! But we are fragile, and we live in a network that includes violation: We will

encounter that which threatens to undo us. The petition does not say that evil will not happen, for it would then pray for the impossible. What it does do is draw us into the prayer of transformation, of resurrection: deliver us from evil.

Jesus ended the prayer with this petition, but the prayer as he gave it was itself an insertion into the larger liturgical prayers of the Jewish community.

These prayers began and ended with praise of God. Hence the church now inserts the Lord's Prayer into the larger liturgy of common worship, and also often adds the words, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

This conclusion owns, as does the beginning, that all our prayers are to God, and that we give ourselves along with our prayers to divine keeping. Prayer begins and ends with God's own self; prayer is the offering of our own stories into the greater story that is God's drama with the universe, of which we are a part. Amen.