Lent I *"Prayer and Temptation"* February 25, 2007

In the Lord's Prayer, one of the petitions is this: *"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."* Yet isn't it interesting that in our Gospel lesson from Luke 4, we read what seems to be the exact opposite experience for Jesus . . .

> "*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and* ***was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil."***

On the one hand, our prayer to God is . . . "LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION." On the other hand, we know that Jesus was literally . . . "LED BY THE SPIRIT IN THE WILDERNESS WHERE HE WAS TEMPTED!"

So how do these contradictory elements find resolution!

First of all, when we ask God to "*lead us not into temptation,*" we have to wonder: Does God ever tempt us or test us? Or is this something that Satan or the devil or the power of evil does to us? Is evil and temptation an external force attacking us from the outside? Or is it an internal force seducing us and marginalizing us from within!

Let me refer you to a passage in the first chapter of the book of James, where he begins by saying that **anyone who has endured trial or temptation is blessed**. In James 1:12, he says: *"Blessed is the man who endures temptation, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him."*

But in the next verse, vs.13, James rejects the idea that God actually tempts us: "*God cannot be tempted by evil and [God] tempts no one."* James goes on to say in vs. 14, *"but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed* ***by his own desire****."*

In other words, don't blame God or others for your temptations. James would probably agree with that person who has said, *"Lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is, and we will find it all by ourselves."*

But why are we instructed by Jesus, to pray literally, *"Lead us not into temptation!"* Actually, that translation is based on a later Latin translation of the prayer, and not in the original text in the Bible in Matthew and Luke which translates, *"Bring us not" or "Allow us not,"* as opposed to "*Lead us not . . ."*

Do you see a difference?

To get very precise in dealing with WHO IS LEADING WHO? . . . In the Gospel, we read that Jesus was "*led by the Spirit*" into the wilderness and there He was tempted. So in a sense, he was **not led into temptation**. Rather, **He was led by the spirit**. But in the process of being **led by the spirit** . . . he encountered temptation!

The way Luke tells the story is that Jesus had just recently been baptized. The spirit had spoken . . . "*You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased!"* . . . and now the next thing that happens is that Jesus finds himself confronting the power of evil and the power of temptation in the wilderness. He has eaten nothing for these 40 days. He is hungry beyond imagination. He is exhausted and weak. His physical needs are immense. And at this point, Jesus is at his lowest. And of course, that's where temptation always begins . . . at our vulnerability, when we are at our weakest!

But how naïve and silly it is for us to think that if the Spirit leads us, we will always have smooth traveling. We will have a comfortable journey, and our destination will be a pleasant place! If Jesus endured temptation, why would we ever suppose that we would not have to deal with this issue!

And for anyone else, who would stay close to Jesus, the going is tough as well! But as the old saying goes, "***When the going gets tough, the tough get going!"*** There is a kind of loving torment to the life of faith. Love always bears within itself some testing, some temptation, some torment, and God would have no less with Jesus, nor will God have any less with us!

Let us just say it . . .**Temptations are part of living.** They should not be a surprise! We will encounter them every day! Most commonly, we think about specific issues and specific sins . . . the temptation to indulge in alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography, lust, gluttony . . . all the sins that lead us down the wrong path!

But fundamentally, temptations are those things, those situations, those encounters which would lead us away . . . from trusting in God. Temptations are those things which would divert our attention to things that appear to satisfy us, but which are not ultimately fulfilling to our basic needs. And temptations include anything that threatens our relationship of faith in God.

As seductive and as enticing and as frightening as temptations are, hidden within the battle of temptation, there is something positive. Martin Luther believed that being "*wooed by evil or the devil"* was simply a sign you were *"in sync with Jesus."* Luther saw temptation from a positive perspective! Why would the devil waste his time and bother with someone who was already lost! You're still fighting! You're still believing!

Temptation, as I said, is designed to entice you to put your ultimate trust in someone or something other than God! So where does prayer fit in? What is the connection between PRAYER and TEMPTATION?

Luther used the German word "*Anfechtungen*" to describe the attacks, temptations, and assaults of Satan or the devil. Dr. David Scaer, who is Professor of Systematic and Biblical Theology at Concordia Seminary, sees an intimate connection between the work of evil and the work of Christian prayer. This is what he writes:

"***Temptation and prayer are necessary for the Christian****, not in the sense that temptation and prayer are good works that justify the Christian before God or even in the sense that the temptation and prayer constitute faith. Prayer becomes the signal that faith will no longer retreat in the face of temptation.*

Prayer is the cry of a faith that realizes its own personal helplessness in confronting the Anfechtungen and throws itself upon God alone for aid*. Temptation describes faith in conflict. Prayer describes faith approaching God for aid in the conflict. Therefore faith, temptation, and prayer exist side by side in the Christian.*"

Dean Will Willimon, Chaplain at Duke University, preached a sermon on this text several years ago. He said that when we pray the Lord's Prayer, "*to deliver us from evil,"* we acknowledge that God is greater than any foe of God. When God and evil go "*head to head*," God still is the ultimate power! The power of evil must be acknowledged and taken seriously, but not too seriously!

It is very interesting that although the Lord's Prayer focuses directly on temptation and evil, **it never mentions Satan by name**!

And that's probably the way we ought to think about Satan.

- Evil is not just a projection of our ego. Evil is real!
- Yet the cross and resurrection of Christ tell us that evil does not have the last word.
- Evil is a threatening power, but it is also a defeated one. The battle rages Monday through Saturday, but every time we come to worship, every time we share in communion, every time we pray, we proclaim who has won the war.

When we pray, "*deliver us from evil*," we acknowledge that we do not have the resources, on our own, to resist evil. But the Good News is that, just as Jesus was able to resist the wiles and seduction of Satan . . . to reject his tempting offers . . . so we, with his help, can also resist. And we resist with the power of prayer!

- In our weakness, we reach out . . . and there is deliverance.

- The community of faith enables us to be free from the power of evil. Jesus stood alone in the wilderness against Satan. But we don't have to stand alone. Standing alone, as isolated individuals, we are no match for evil. Maybe that's why you are here this morning . . . to be reminded that you are not alone. The church stands with you as you face your temptations, in whatever wilderness you find yourself.

- Jesus, who knows what it's like to be face-to-face with evil, Jesus stands with you. Although temptation is real, evil does not have the last word. As St. Paul writes in I Corinthians 15: "*But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory, hrough our Lord, Jesus Christ*!"

So when we pray, "*deliver us from evil*," Jesus was not just talking about "*evil*" in general, but "*the evil one*." This is where some of us can get a bit uncomfortable. Many of us are reluctant to think of evil as personified in Satan or as the Devil, yet this recognition of the autonomous power of personified evil is part of the Lord's Prayer.

On the one hand we are right to be cautious about attributing evil to Satan or the Devil because most often, these attributions have been for very human acts of evil, and it's a cop-out to plea, "*the Devil made me do it*." On the other hand, the reality of evil is in the form of a person!

Reinhold Neibuhr, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century as well as a careful social historian, defined EVIL this way: "*evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard for the whole, whether the whole be conceived of the immediate community, or the total community of humanity, or the total order of the world. The good is, on the other hand, always the harmony of the whole on various levels*."

Neibuhr's seriousness about EVIL came out of the horrors of World War I and II. And while he was quite explicit in his definition of "*evil*" in very human terms, he did not underestimate its power to destroy. There is more to evil than we can readily explain. Niebuhr described it when he said that the phenomenon of evil in the world is inadequately explained as simply the sum total of the individual evil acts of people. Evil is more than that!

Jesus teaches us that when we pray, we pray **not to be led into a time of such severe temptation and trial that we are in danger of losing our faith**. We are to pray for deliverance from the power of evil . . . "*Deliver us from evil*."

The connection between the two requests is that "*ordinary*" temptations are not little, or petty or insignificant. They are manifestations of the ultimate power of evil. We are not to take them lightly, but to see them as a threat to faith and to pray for God's deliverance from them.

If we think of evil in two categories, the first one we might call the "*ordinary, day-to-day kind.*" What would be on your list?

- procrastination by watching TV or playing on the computer instead of working on relationships with your family

- workaholism by making your work appear so demanding and encompassing, that you don't have time for your family and friends

- avoidance of a painful situation that is important to confront

- sedation of feelings with drugs or alcohol

- reverting to old prejudices and stereotypes (such as not liking somebody because of their skin color, sexual preference or ethnicity).

- Would any of these be on your list?

The second category would be "*temptations of the soul*" . . . temptations that may be related to our giving in to the "*day-to-day temptations*":

- apathy
- ignoring warning signs about physical, mental, or spiritual health
- thinking, acting, and voting your self-interest without regard for the whole community or the total community of humanity
- being satisfied with the status quo.
- What would be on your list as "*temptations of the soul*?"

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus reminds us to take evil seriously. In the question we asked at baptism, "*Do you renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways?*" The baptismal family replies, "*Yes, I renounce them!*" And then we confess our faith together in the words of the Apostle's Creed – "*I believe in God the father . . . I believe in Jesus Christ his son, our Lord . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church . . .*"

So we take temptation and evil seriously. It is serious business. But we also trust in the power of the Lord in our lives. Trust and have faith that . . .

- In prayer, we have the defenses we need to deal with temptation and testing.
- In prayer we have the resources we need to deal with temptation and testing.
- In prayer, we have the presence of Jesus who stands with us, no matter how powerful that temptation is!

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, <u>*Home By Another Way*</u>, writes this: *"The hollowness we sometimes feel, is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying.*

Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole. To enter the wilderness, is to leave them behind, and nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar will do.

What is going on when you crave a chocolate bar? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it and see what you find out.

Then tell the devil to get lost!"

Here is a final thought . . . if the main focus of the Lord's Prayer is for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, then we should say this . . . "*Let us not be distracted, let us not be side-tracked by temptations? In this time, keep us from the evil one, from the demonic powers, from corporate evil, from our preoccupation with success, security or popularity, so that we might remain focused on what is most important — doing your will on earth as it is in heaven.*"