

STAY WITH US IN OUR MESSES

Matthew 6:9-14

Fifth Sunday in Lent, 2017

Sunrise Presbyterian Church

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My alarm goes off at 6 a.m. every morning, and when that happens, I have about 10 seconds to decide to stumble out of bed, get into my workout clothes, feed the dog and drive to the gym OR to curl up in my chair with my dog, drink a few cups of coffee, enjoy my morning oatmeal and read the daily papers. Temptation strikes as soon as I wake up.

As the day progresses, temptation never lets up. Should I eat three handfuls of pretzels at 10 a.m.? Should I read the pile of articles on the table beside my lunch OR should I find something entertaining on the Internet? Should I turn off the news because it makes me angry? Should I call my friend to apologize for my off handed comment? Should I drive just a little over the speed limit on my way back to the office? Should I not be quite honest - in other words, should I lie - on my tax returns? Daily life consists of one temptation after another. Choices matter - If I don't work out - I must face ramifications about my health. If I speed through the school zone on the way to the church - I might get a ticket - or risk hitting a child on his way to school. The choices I make matter and sometimes they matter greatly.

Hence, as we continue our Lenten sermon series on the Lord's Prayer - and focus on the lines, ***Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil***, we need to stop and think about it for a while - because not to be tempted at all would mean that we lose our free will to make decisions. While there are some choices in life I'd rather not have to make - such as decisions concerning end of life health care for a loved one - or whether to send money to a child who has run off to LA to live on the street -- if I lose my ability to make my own decisions - I am diminished. I want the ability to make my own choices - even if those choices are wrong. I want to be the one who makes the call on the medical decision - and I want to be the one who decides whether to offer grace or tough love to a recalcitrant child. I really don't want NOT to be led into temptation - what I want is for God to stay by me as I face my choices each day. John Calvin says that we don't want to be overwhelmed or brought down by temptations.ⁱ

We think of someone like Bernie Madoff - whose fake investment scheme bilked many out of their lifetime savings and imagine that WE could never tell such big lies. Yet, Dan Ariely, a professor at Duke writes that "behind big lies is a

series of small deceptions. Big deceptions grow from many small ones. One of the frightening conclusions we have is that what separates honest people from not-honest people is not necessarily character, it's opportunity." When we have the opportunity to lie and it will benefit us - we have to decide if we would rather be an honest person - than benefit from our lie. Ariely's research shows that once a person tells one lie and discovers no negative consequences - then each successive lie is easier to tell. Once a student cheats on a test and doesn't get caught - the second time is easier - and by third time - why should the student study?ⁱⁱ Cheating seems successful - and thus we are tempted more and more to continue spinning a dishonest life.

We are tempted in so many ways - great and small. Parents worry about teens learning to deal with their plethora of options: meth - alcohol - guns - speeding - sex - it is a long list. Our kids face huge temptations every day as they grow up, and what worries parents the most is that if their offspring succumb to these temptations - they know that these "good" kids will have few choices for undoing their bad choices. Methamphetamine is incredibly addictive - almost from the first use - a person is drawn into an evil cycle of dependence on a destructive drug. The thought of young teens taking a joy ride at 95 miles an hour on back roads makes us shudder with the consequences. It appears far too easy for someone who is angry to pick up a gun and use it against a loved one.

Succumbing to temptation can lead us to evil - from which we pray to God to deliver us. Sometimes our evil is of our own making - we have lied - we have cheated - we have broken laws - we have been angry and have said hurtful things - we have told our loved ones to leave - we have lived every day with stories about people who have harmed their families - have terrorized their neighbors; it is a frightening prospect. To be sure there are other times that evil simply seems to descend upon us. Sure there are times when disaster strikes - just this past month Kansans have dealt with tornadoes and floods have destroyed homes. Wildfires have destroyed herds of cattle - cancer has stricken our beloved - jobs have disappeared - some of us have lost our health care. Most of these things are out of our control and they threaten to destroy us - to undo us, but we must learn to live with them.

The more pernicious evil is the evil which can be traced back to bad choices we made. We don't forgive others - and they in turn may experience despair. We eat our fill of pie when we have diabetes - and we get really bad heart disease. We don't intervene when we suspect child abuse - and terrible things happen to a beloved child. We need God to be with us as we are tempted to go in so many wrong directions.

It's important to recall that the Lord's Prayer is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is aware we have anxiety about meeting our daily needs - he knows we want to respond to threats and slights from others with anger or violence - he knows we'd rather put our needs first before the needs of others. Jesus is aware that life can be overwhelming. He knows it is so easy for us to descend into despair -

Our plea to God is that God stay with us in the middle of whatever messes we may have made. We pray that God will be with us even if we lied and cheated - or said angry things - we pray that God will be with us in the middle of our awful mess. We pray that God will forgive us and help us take the right course - start anew and not fall prey to despair.

"Do not forsake us in our times of conflict but lead us into new beginnings."ⁱⁱⁱ Phillip Newell translates this phrase of the prayer. Stay with us, Jesus. We make really dumb decisions sometimes. There are days when we allow our friends to convince us to do the wrong things. There are times when, like the apostle Paul, we cannot do the things we know we should do - and instead do the things we know we should not do. We pray not to be forsaken - but forgiven when we simply mess up.

But this is not just a prayer to get us out of our shortcomings - it is a prayer to lead us into new beginnings. Our choices are never so terrible that some new beginning is not possible. Our prayer is that Jesus stay with us and guide us - that Jesus open our eyes to new possibilities - new choices which will lead us in ways that God's Kingdom might be seen - even in the midst of our failings. Stay with us, Jesus. We need you to guide us - but we will follow even as you lead us to new beginnings. Amen.

ⁱ John Calvin, *Commentaries, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Vol. 1, 213.*

ⁱⁱ NPR, Hidden Brain, Shankur Vendatim, March 27, 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ Phillip Newell, *Casa del Sol Lord's Prayer*