

Summary:

“Deliver Us,” the fifth and final in our series, “The Prayer of Jesus,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, September 22, 2019

Detail:

So here’s something to think about: when you hear the word “sin,” what content comes to mind?

That is, when you hear the word “sin,” what do you think of? If “sin” means for you a list of “sins,” what is on your list and are there priorities within that list?

And as you think about that, I then want you to think in the same way about the word “temptation.” When you hear that word, what content comes to mind immediately? Do you think of it as applying to one particular type or degree of temptation or simply as a generic term for any and all of them?

Let those two things percolate in your subconscious for a little while we also think about temptation in terms of our prayer.

I want to remind you of something we talked about way back in week one: the concept of synonymous parallelism in poetry. You remember we gave several examples of that poetic structure that is used in many of the Psalms and that is also found in the Lord’s Prayer itself. Well, we find another example of it in our verses for today, where, depending on the translation you use, it says something like this:

and do not bring us to the time of trial

but rescue/deliver us from the evil one

“These two lines are mutually interpretive,” John Dominic Crossan writes, “so that God both leads us into and rescues us from test/trial/temptation by the evil one.

But that still does not tell us the precise content of that test or trial or temptation,” all three of which are translations of the Greek word *peirasmos*.

Is Jesus talking generally or specifically here?

Well, Crossan posits that, while there are many different types and degrees of temptation that we face every day, that the temptation that Jesus references at the close of the Lord’s Prayer is a very specific temptation that is “deeply embedded in the concrete historical situation of the first-century Israel’s confrontation with the Roman Empire.” Context.

And to understand that allow me give you a brief primer on ancient calendars and dates that will hopefully help us here. When I was in school, and perhaps when you were as well, we learned dates as BC (Before Christ) and AD (anno domine - the year of the Lord, or the year Jesus was born.)

So the years designated BC counted down until Christ’s birth, and then AD counted up after his birth.

There was no year zero, 1 BC was followed by 1 AD.

And that was all well and good, until scholars discovered documentary evidence that Herod the Great, the Herod we remember from the birth stories of Jesus, actually died earlier than originally thought, in the year 4

BC. Well, we know that Herod was alive at the time of Jesus' birth, so that meant that Jesus was born no later than 4 BC, and likely before that, which messes up the whole BC and AD calendar system.

In order to correct that issue, and also to be more inclusive since the majority of the world is NOT Christian and non-Christian countries rightfully expect a non-Christian dating system, the concept of BCE and CE was developed.

BCE stands for Before the Common Era while CE is, of course, the Common Era. The Common Era is designated as beginning in the year 1. So scholars now believe that Jesus was born no later than 4 BCE, and if his ministry began when he was 30, it would have begun around 26 CE, with the Crucifixion taking place in about 29 CE or so. The authentic letters of Paul are thought to have been written in the late 40s to mid 50s, the earliest of the Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, was written in the late 60s, but not later than 70 CE. The Roman Empire destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 66 CE, about the time Mark was being written or shortly before. Matthew and Luke were likely written in the late 70s or even early 80s, and John's Gospel is thought to have been as late as the late 80s or even the early to mid 90s, some 60 years after the Crucifixion.

Knowing this helps to lay the groundwork for understanding the ending of our prayer.

In 4 BC, when Herod the Great died, violent uprisings

occurred among the people of Israel, but especially among small, violent, insurgent groups, whose desire was to drive out their Roman occupiers.

This was met, of course, by a massive and violent response by the Roman Legions of Caesar Augustus. The Pax Romana, or Roman Peace as it was called, was anything but peaceful. Rome met resistance with overwhelming force, doing whatever was necessary to subdue any who thought they could rise against the Empire. The incursion into Galilee to put down the rebellions there resulted in the total destruction of the provincial capital, Sepphoris, as well as to thousands of crucifixions - intended to intimidate any who even considered rising up against the power of Rome.

What happened in nearby Nazareth, where Jesus was being raised, is not documented, but the Roman blitz of shock and awe would have spread to any nearby community that they thought necessary to get their message - resistance is futile - across to the villagers. "Grain, produce, and livestock would have been taken, and farms, houses, and trees destroyed." Combatants would have been slaughtered or crucified and non-violent resisters would have been martyred. "Those unable to hide successfully would have been killed if male, raped if female, and enslaved if young," Crossan reports.

So, it would be hard to imagine that, growing up in that context, Jesus wouldn't have heard about "the year the Romans came," or that that wouldn't have been for him

what Pearl Harbor or 9/11 are for us today.

And so we might wonder, how did this shape what the young Jesus thought about God and Rome, about homeland and empire, about rebellion and resistance, and about violent versus non-violent resistance?

And he had to wonder, where was God on the day of Rome's revenge? And was the God of Israel violent or non-violent?

All of this, Crossan proposes, would have shaped the viewpoint, the lens through which Jesus looked at life, at faith, at everything. We all have lenses through which we look at or approach life - the academic word for this is our hermeneutic. If you grew up during the Great Depression, you will look at life differently than someone who grew up in the economic expansion of the 90s.

If your childhood was lived during the Second World War, your point of view, your hermeneutic will be different from someone who has only known peacetime.

But even more basic than that, if you are a white male your viewpoint, your lens, will not be the same as that of a male of color, or of a female. And all kinds of things shape our lenses; age, race and ethnicity, gender, socio economic status, sexual orientation, religious belief or non-belief, educational level, and many, many more.

And so Jesus' life and ministry were certainly shaped by his surroundings, his family life, and his economic status. And these events of his childhood would certainly have impacted his life and ministry, and thus would have also

influenced this prayer that he gave to his disciples. If we think back to the last two weeks of this series, about the ideas of bread and debt, we understand that having enough bread and relief from debt were not just hopes for life in general, but also specific criticisms against Galilee's Romanization under Herod Antipas and the commercialization of fishing in the Sea of Galilee.

The 20s of the first century were a dangerous time. So, suggest Crossan, perhaps just as the bread and debt were specific in Jesus' prayer, so is temptation. We know Jesus faced temptation - the Gospels tell us of Jesus' time in the wilderness after his baptism when he faced temptations - three to be exact. And in Matthew's telling, the sequence of the temptations progress from personal or individual through corporate and communal to structural and systemic temptation. The first temptation begins with a challenge to Jesus' identity: 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' Jesus ignores that slight and refutes the temptation by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: 'It is written, One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Miraculous power," Crossan concludes, "cannot be used for personal use - even for that seemingly appropriate task of creating some bread after a forty-day fast.

The second temptation follows from that first: Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him

on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The tempter, recognizing that Jesus quotes scripture in response, uses scripture himself, citing Psalm 91:11-12, which Jesus rebuts once again with a citation from Deuteronomy.

Notice also that, while the first temptation was private, concerning food for Jesus all alone in the desert, the second involves a public display of miraculous power, actually tempting God to protect Jesus while Jesus ‘proves’ his divine identity. And of course, “test” in this passage is *peirasmos* in Greek.

So think about what we’ve just seen.

What Jesus faced, and what we face as well, is that “we are tested or tempted to tempt or test God.”

We saw this in the Exodus story, with the issue of the manna from heaven. When the people demanded food, and later water, Moses responded to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”

And Crossan makes this distinction for us when it comes to God’s tempting or testing us versus our tempting or testing God.

He writes, “In the biblical tradition, it is normal and

acceptable for God to test or tempt us, but abnormal and unacceptable for us to test or tempt God.

Why? Because our covenantal character and commitment can change like the moon, but God's is as steady as the sun. Our integrity fluctuates and so God must test or tempt it more or less regularly, but for us to test or tempt God is to doubt - at least momentarily - God's fidelity to God's own covenantal character."

In other words, God NEVER breaks covenant, we do.

In the third temptation, we see a change in the tempter's approach. There is no questioning of "If" Jesus is the Son of God - he knows that to be the case.

And there is no quoting of Scripture by the tempter.

He gets right down to business. Listen carefully to how Matthew tells this:

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Pretty straightforward - one sentence.

Here, the tempter simply asserts his dominion over the "kingdoms of the world," and offers them to Jesus in exchange for worshipping him. But let's look at this same temptation as told in Luke's gospel, because the two of them together help us better understand what is happening here. In Luke's Gospel, the third temptation goes like this:

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to

him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it

to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

Did you hear the difference?

Luke specifies that these kingdoms have been given over to him and that the tempter can give them to anyone he pleases. Think about that claim, these kingdoms have been given over to him.

The remarkable thing is, Jesus doesn't even contest this. We might expect Jesus to respond with the repartee of a biblical apologist, quoting something like Psalm 24 - "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." But no, Jesus never denies the tempter's claim - he implicitly accepts it.

He implicitly concedes that the tempter "can give him all the kingdoms of the world," at the price of demonic worship. Jesus simply refuses that worship by citing Deuteronomy 6:13: "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your

God, and serve only him.' But why doesn't Jesus flatly deny any demonic control over the earth?" Crossan asks. "Notice," he says, "that, actually, the tempter never speaks of 'creation,' or 'the world,' but of 'all the kingdoms of the world' along with their 'glory' and their 'power.' That is the violent world of civilization - as demonstrated, for example," by the violence of the [Roman Empire] - "rather than the non-violent world of creation - as demonstrated, for example, by Genesis 1.

The tempter does not own and cannot offer to anyone 'the world that God so loved,' according to John 3:16, but only the world we are told 'not to love.'

The only 'world' that the tempter has the ability to offer us, is that aspect of the world that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we're called to abhor."

And Crossan then goes on to suggest that, of course, we would all admit that we should be worshiping only

God and not Satan, but that, in reality, what we worship and what we say are not necessarily the same thing.

"What's the difference," he asks, "in content between worshiping God and worshiping Satan, in light of the story of Jesus' temptation? [To obtain and possess the kingdoms of the world, with their power and glory, by violent injustice is to worship Satan," he says. On the other hand, "To obtain and possess the kingdom (understood as the kingdom of God), the power, and the glory by non-violent justice," he concludes, "is to worship God."] - REPEAT THIS

And so, he concludes that the temptation referenced in the Lord's Prayer is about violence versus non-violence; injustice versus justice. Jesus' final temptation, and the temptation that we are always faced, is the temptation to establish, or try to establish, the kingdom of God by violence.

That would be to conflate the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world; to conflate divine and demonic power. And that would be, in effect, worshiping Satan.

And we see this demonstrated in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus is about to be arrested, the Gospels tell in various ways that Peter draws a sword with which to defend Jesus and cuts off the ear of one of his pursuers. Jesus demands that the sword be put away, cautioning that if he wanted to he could call down a legion of angels to defend him; and then he heals the wounded man. And this raises the question, "If opponents use violence to attack Jesus, should his disciples use violence to defend him?"

The answer, according to Jesus, is quite clearly, no. Even when opponents use the sword to attack Jesus, the disciples must not use the sword to defend him. But if not then, when? If not then, never!, Jesus says.

But that is the precise temptation to which Peter succumbed in the garden."

As with turning stones to bread, miraculous power, Jesus is saying, cannot be used for personal use - it cannot be used for violence.

So, Crossan suggests that in this radical manifesto, this hymn of hope that is the Prayer of Jesus, Jesus' intent was not to create the timeless piece of liturgy we now consider the prayer to be - his intent and the content of the prayer are very specific to his own time, to the issues facing the people of his time and especially the people, including his disciples, who were there at ground zero of the Roman occupation in Galilee. The temptation from which they, and we, most need to be delivered, is the temptation to use violence, in any form, to try to bring

about the kingdom of God.

And it's easy for us to say, or to think, we would never do that. But the church has used violence to try to bring about the kingdom since shortly after Jesus' death, and in twenty centuries, it has not stopped.

Whether that violence takes the form of militarism, not the least of which would be the Crusades of the Middle Ages, of forced religious conversion that has been imposed on entire continents over the centuries in order to fulfill a misperceived mandate to "make disciples of all nations," or of trying to impose one's own hermeneutic, one's personal, one's group, one's denominational or one's political party's own interpretation onto others as the only true and acceptable way to worship God, the greatest temptation that we face as Christians, the temptation from which we most need deliverance, is the evil of violence done in the name of God. Violence of any kind, physical, verbal, mental, emotional, economic -

violence is never, ever acceptable, Jesus says, in pursuit of the kingdom of God. Not ever.

So, as we conclude this message and this series, here are some things that I hope we can take from our exploration. First, when we translate, or at least understand, the patriarchal term "father" as the more appropriate term "householder" then we understand God the Father as God the Householder of the World, the one who sees that everyone has enough. This is foundational to the idea of God as a God of justice and righteousness -

it is only right that those who dwell together in the household of God have enough.

Second, having been created in the image of God, the divine Householder, we are to collaborate with God as appointed stewards of a world that we must maintain in justice and equality.

Third, as Christians, we understand Jesus as the Son of the Father, the Son of the Householder of the World, and thus an heir with Jesus.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to work with and for the Son of the Householder in bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. When we call God, “Abba, Father, Parent” we claim our place and our responsibility as co-heirs of God with Jesus.

And finally, all of this “comes together for us in this Prayer of Jesus... It is,” as Crossan claims, “both a revolutionary manifesto and a hymn of hope, not just for Christianity, but for all the world.” It is a prayer that “comes from the heart of Judaism, through the mouth of Christianity, and to the conscience of the earth.”

And the author concludes, “In the Abba Prayer the hallowing of God’s name means the coming of God’s

kingdom so that God’s eternal will is accomplished ‘as in heaven, so on earth.’

Think again, to [week one,] of God’s will as a two-sided coin: one side of the coins proclaims the divine name, divine kingdom, and divine will; the other side announces enough human food for today, no human debt for

tomorrow, and the absence of human violence always.
Think now, have you ever seen a one-sided coin?"

We cannot have the one without the other.

If we want to know the nature of God, we need look no further than Jesus Christ. Jesus, not the Bible, is the full revelation of God, the true Word of God.

And as Christians, Jesus is the lens through which we understand Scripture. It is easy to say that the God we see in the Hebrew Bible was a violent God and that the God we see in the New Testament was a loving God.

It is easy, and it is wrong. The Book of Revelation, from the New Testament, is the most violent book in all of the Bible.

No, our clearest vision of God the Father, God the Householder, God who is described in 1 John as "love," does not come through words about God, but comes through the lens of Jesus, the Son of God.

The Son who, even when his life was on the line, rejected violence in all of its forms. That is the temptation from which, Christ reminds us in the form of a simple prayer, we need deliverance. May it be so. Amen.