

Taking the Exam then Attending the Class

Bill:

Holly and I have been using the teachings of both Buddha and Jesus as a source of guidance, comfort and challenge during this time of pandemic. More recently we have been going through the three chapters in the Gospel of Matthew that are known as “The Sermon on the Mount,” a collection of Jesus sayings and stories that likely contain some of the most familiar of all the Jesus sayings and stories. Most recently we have taken a deep dive into the verses that are called “The Lord’s Prayer” and today we come to the end of the prayer, at least the line scholars consider the last authentic line. We will devote next Sunday to the line that was added later.

All of that being said, I would like to begin today with a piece on how what we know as “The Lord’s Prayer” came into existence. This is my contribution to religious literacy for today.

I believe that the more clarity we can gain about the teachings of Jesus and his immediate followers, the better able we are to see how these teachings are useful in our own spiritual practice as we seek to grow in peace, love, joy, patience and humility.

The line in the prayer we are up to is the one most people know as “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” This is likely the most misunderstood and mistranslated of all of the

lines in the prayer. Not only is it not part of something Jesus ever taught but, further, it supports the notion of an interventionist God who has the potentiality to lead people into bad territory. More about that later.

Perhaps the best translation of the line is “may we not experience test after test.”

Eugene Peterson translates it “Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.”

Neil Douglas-Klotz, in his work *Prayers of the Cosmos*, renders it like this: “Do not let me be seduced by that which would divert me from my true purpose, but illuminate the opportunities of the present moment.”

So, how did this line come to be and, of equal importance, how is it applicable to our own spiritual growth and living?

Jesus had a ministry of healing and teaching that attracted followers. He deputized some of these people to continue his ministry after he was gone. He knew what he was doing was provocative and once on the path he had chosen, death was inevitable. After his execution and the experiences of resurrection that his disciples had, his followers stayed together in community.

These people were mostly Jewish and a significant portion of them were women. I have read several different explanations for how the women leadership got written out of the story early on. One reason was that these disciples sought to make sense of their experience with Jesus by returning to their synagogue practices. These were highly patriarchal structures. Another suggestion is that a war took place around 30 years after the death of Jesus and that the victims were mostly women and children.

These Jewish men began to create stories about Jesus. Just as he had taught them in parables, they began to teach about him telling their own parables about him. At some point some few of these began to write down some of what they remembered of his teaching and some of the stories that he told. Since the Western mind is both literal and analytic, the Western church has not taken these teachings as parables about Jesus but, rather, as things that Jesus himself literally said.

One of the most helpful pieces of instruction I got early on in my seminary training was this: Jesus taught in parables. His disciples taught in parables about Jesus.

Later on others took this material to create their own versions of the Jesus story. For example, there was a collection of sayings that both the authors of Matthew and Luke used to create their narratives. Since so much Matthew and Luke overlap, and they didn't know each other, the scholars hypothesize that they each

had access to a common source that they used for their creation. They also used what we know as the Gospel of Mark. There is another document that also has some of its content repeated in Matthew, Mark and Luke. That is what we know today as The Gospel of Thomas. My conclusion has been that the sayings common to the Gospels in the Christian Collection that are found in Thomas is that those in the Thomas version are the earliest.

At any rate this early community of followers took some of what they remembered as the teachings of Jesus and constructed what we now know as The Lord's Prayer.

Why did they do this? For several reasons. For one thing Jesus taught by praying aloud in public. This was a very Jewish thing to do. Communal and liturgical prayer was important to them.

For another reason, the prayer they created helped keep his memory alive for them. They had heard Jesus use some variation of these lines likely many times.

And, perhaps more importantly, saying this prayer strengthened their identity and held them together under fire. Now, why would they need that? Because, by continuing his teachings and practices they came to be subjected to the same treatment he got - persecution and, in many cases, death. And, just to be clear, they were not persecuted by believing in things like the virgin birth or resurrection. Those things were commonly believed

about all sorts of “gods” at the time. They were persecuted for strictly political reasons, for not supporting the existing empire. It would be natural for them to pray, given their worldview, that they might be delivered from times of persecution.

Holly:

I want to take us on a bit of a philosophical tour of the question of evil, how it got perverted, in a sense by thinking it belongs in the realm of the supernatural, rather than the realm of the human or in the nature of the universe.

Paul Tillich, one of the great philosophical/theological minds of our time, argued that the distinction between philosophy and theology is essentially one of definition: philosophy is about “the structure of being” and theology is about “the meaning of being.” This is like the non-dual nature of form and function, mind and spirit. These two fields are both distinguishable and inseparable. I’ve often thought that Jesus himself was influenced by Plato. Both were seekers of “the way,” pursuers of the ultimate mystery: Love.

Theist and atheists both agree on the existence of evil. And that it exists by degrees -

There is natural/arbitrary impersonal evil like a hurricane, flood, or fire.

There is a broken arm the day before you pitch your World Series debut - we called call this accidental evil.

Then there is human moral evil like racism, genocide, murder...

The question is, what is the root of evil? Is it an impersonal God, a very active devil, or the nature of the third law of motion: that every action has an equal and opposite reaction?

Ivan—in *The Brothers Karamozov* by Dostoevsky—basically breaks up with God because he cannot accept that the same God who allows a child to die also has a spot for another in heaven. He says “A bad God is not only unworthy of My worship, he’s also not someone I want to spend eternity with.” In some way this is like breaking up with nature because she produces devastating storms or humanity because we harm one another. In other words, it’s an impossible bargain.

The question for theists remains: why would a good God allow for even a minuscule drop of evil in the world? If evil is allowed to persist, then God must be more powerful than it, ultimately not letting the universe collapse on itself. The problem of Evil is one of the most serious objections to the existence of God. People abandon their faith over it than any other problem. The presumption about God becomes:

1. God is not all good: Perhaps God has a mean streak in Him/ Her and allows evil to happen. He sees the hurricane

approaching but doesn't care if it kills men, women, children, doesn't listen to all our "prayers" that if turn the other way. But this clashes with mainstream beliefs of God as essentially good.

2. God is not all-powerful: God sees the evil but is helpless to stop it. S/He would love to stop that tsunami but can only stand by and watch. God lacks power to save the innocent. This too seems a sad commentary on the notion of God we want to believe in. But then why not stop this from hurting undeserving humans and animals?
3. God is not all-knowing: these evils take God completely by surprise, just as they take humanity by surprise.

With these negations of God, faith erodes and we wind up with Ivan - why in the heck do I want to believe in this God if he is not all that great or good? Theists were not happy with these conclusions, so the thought trend became that humans must be separate from God because of some innate or external force of evil. Thus we needed a mediator - enter substitutionary atonement - to get back to God. There's got to be a third way...a way to pursue an understanding of God (or sacred mystery), a way to see ourselves as agents of evolution and choice, a way to understand Evil without externalizing it. The above circular debates about God's nature miss a key point: neither evil nor God are entities, but manifestation of being evolved, in part, by our choices about becoming.

God does not so much permit evil or good, but is a kind of container for the creative state of being, which by nature includes freedom, therefore chaos. This is what it means to call God the ground of Being, rather than a supernatural being. (Jeffrey Small) This statement is both philosophical and theological.

Bill:

The way most people know this phrase in the Lord's Prayer is as "lead us not into temptation." This is more than just a bad translation of the phrase. It is just godawful theology.

I hope some of you remember that the image of God presented by Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas is that of a creative, loving, brooding spirit hovering over creation and giving birth to all that is and all who are. This is one of the main points in Diarmuid O'Murchu's "Doing Theology in an Evolutionary Way."

There is not a god out there who occasionally takes a stick and stirs things up on planet earth.

We really need to outgrow this notion of God. Many people either fear God is going to do something or hope that God will somehow intervene in earthly affairs to get things straight. So many Christians have been taught to relate to God, as well as many of the writings in the Bible, with guilt or dread. I heard John Dominic Crossan say something that has stuck with me

ever since I heard him said it: “We need to outgrow the notion of waiting on God’s intervention in favor of an understanding that God is waiting on our collaboration.”

Holly:

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—a theologian, philosopher, and scientist—writes that evil is like a growing pain of the unfinished universe and of the unfinished evolution of the human spirit, which he believes is evolving toward pure spirit. I don’t know if I agree that spirit will eventually overtake form—that feels like more dualism to me—but Evil as a part of evolution falls in line with the following:

As long as we remain unfinished, non-integrated, and under the delusion of the separate self, evil will persist. Teilhard calls evolution an “immense groping, an immense search, an immense attack...whose progress can take place only at the expense of many failures, of many wounds.” We are part of the wound...can we also be part of the healing? He goes on to say that species who have suffered as a result of this “immense groping” are “casualties, fallen on the field of honor.”

Oof. That’s a tough one to stomach. If we are collateral damage to the creative/destructive cycle of the universe, how are we also collaborators? Part of this is recognizing that every decision we make, individually and collectively, has consequences. Our decision to use gasoline and fossil fuels creates untenable

pollution. Our decision to import Africans as slaves led to a social system designed with racism. Our decision to create renewable energy leads to repair. You get the picture...the fall and redemption story told through the Christ metaphor extends to all of creation. But I think we have to go further — extend evolution past the “Cosmic Christ” imagery, otherwise we limit both. We are, as you said, co-creators with the universe and must move our very small section of it, deliberately and consciously, toward...what? This is the choice we make...We must understand that in a real sense, we are both a cause of and an antidote to evil.

Teilhard certainly thought about God in terms of evolution, in a dynamic world of movement, change, and complexity, but our ideas about evil remain abstract and even dispassionate if we cannot understand them in a real world context. So what exactly are we praying for deliverance FROM? It is overwhelming to look at the persistence of evil throughout human history and feel audacious enough to hope we have any impact on changing it. But if we see the devil and Christ as aspects of our inner nature, just as order and disorder are aspects of the universe, we begin to see that we do have a part to play. We don't often hear this question about the nature of evil from evolutionary biologists and cosmologists because there is an acceptance that pain, suffering, destruction, and even evil are absolute requirements for life as we know it to exist.

Bill:

Just to be clear: God does not make “bad things” happen to anyone. God never leads anyone into temptation. The good news that Jesus taught and lived is that God is light and love and that this light and love, although we don’t always see or experience it, has overcome darkness and hate and that darkness and hate cannot put it out. A loving parent would never lead her children into darkness.

Most of the problems and difficulties we experience in this world, both individually and corporately come directly from us. We make wrong or ill-informed choices, we operate out of ignorance, many people are emotionally immature, others operate out of false beliefs or misleading philosophies.

Talking about personal responsibility is not talking about blame. It is about taking personal responsibility for the way we create our lives sometimes by how we respond even to events that happen to us quite randomly.

Jesus taught and I believe that if we work at putting our allegiance to the Sacred central then we will be led in the direction making wise and useful choices.

My father was a product of and constrained both consciously and unconsciously by his culture. We all are. He shaped my life in some good and positive ways.

Grounding me in the church that birthed and shaped me was one way. I grew up in the community of loving people who cared for and taught me. My father took me to church when I was six days old.

He was also a member of the Rotary Club. For those of you who don't know, the Rotary Club is an international service organization that brings together, in local chapters, people from the business community to provide humanitarian service and to advance goodwill and peace around the world. One of the radical things they have done is contribute to the eradication of polio around the world.

My father never missed a weekly Rotary Club meeting for over fifty years. He achieved the highest Rotary Award that a person can achieve. I can remember when I was a child that there sat a plaque on his desk in our home and it also hung on the wall of his business that contained the Rotary Club ethical four way test. It is non-political and non-religious. My Dad made me memorize it when I was no older than six:

Is it the TRUTH?

Is it FAIR to all concerned?

Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?

Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Is this not just another way of saying "treat others like you want to be treated"?

When we pray that we might not be diverted from our true identity and our true purpose, we are praying in the manner that Jesus prayed. It is when we forget who we are and how we are to love, that we cause ourselves, each other and the planet so much pain and trouble.

It is a good prayer: Let us not be deluded by the surface things in life, neither let us become so inward and self-absorbed that we cannot act simply and humanely at the same time.

Holly:

What are our options of going deep with this line without becoming too binary, too limiting of our views about God and Jesus and ourselves as either good or evil? I wonder if we can't come to see ourselves as transformers...

It is so much easier to call Evil the Devil, or the system, or the Nazis, or the KKK...not us....Just as it is easier to long for redemption outside of ourselves.

Traditional philosophy typically looked to external reasons that evil exists—why would God allow evil? Why would he tempt us into doing evil in order to test our loyalty or our strength? That there is an opposing external force was the only logical answer! And, that we need an intermediary—Plato called the

intermediary Eros, and Christians call it Christ—to be our salvation is our only hope!

So much philosophy is anthropocentric, focusing only on the meaning of human existence in relation to the divine or nature. Then Nietzsche comes along and makes this radical move in philosophy...he basically says no no no. Take this conversation out of theology altogether, and make it about the human as part of nature, not outside of it. We need to de-center ourselves in order to better understand ourselves.

He determined that good and evil are different expressions of the same nature. In other words, we — humans — are directly involved in the existence of evil, thus we are also intimately involved in transforming it. Here's the thing, though...we cannot do so by erasing it, only by facing it. This is painful, but this kind of remembrance is also an act of love...Nietzsche said “Whatever is done for love always occurs beyond good and evil.” And I add...what is done out of love is always transformative.

Another transformative act of love that can be *learning to love the self*.

We so often externalize evil; we think it is something that happens separate from us, but this is not the case. Contemporary sage, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote, referring to racism as the air we breathe, “There is an insidious cost to this—a man invents a

monster to justify his brutality, only to find the monster is within.”

This *should be* the aim of religion—learning to love the self and others as God does. This process does not mean we will be delivered from suffering, but that we will increase our stamina in the face of evil and suffering when it arises. Nietzsche is of course famous for saying “God is dead,” which was actually a call to humans to become better versions of themselves without fear based motivation to appease a retributive God or devil. This is the “good struggle,” our own Jacob wrestling with the angel journey that is worthy of our time, attention and love.

To this end Nietzsche writes:

“He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.” Ask anyone who has battled addictions in life—they know this fight.

As it is a common theme in literature, it is still very apparent that we are working out our ideas about good vs. evil. Consider Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Chronicles of Narnia....all the superhero movies my husband has gotten my whole family into. We are supposed to root for the good guy, the hero, the one who comes to vanquish the darkness. But my favorite characters are always the more complex, sort of bordering on antihero types. These are the characters who have been through something.

They have suffered in some way and encountered the abyss within.

Bucky, a character known as the Winter Soldier, is this kind of hero. He was used as a mercenary by an evil organization called Hydra, his body and mind literally frozen in between the times he would be used as a weapon. When he is found by his best friend, who happens to also be Steve Rogers as Captain America, he is in a sense delivered from evil. He is shown—albeit with great struggle and much resistance—who he truly is.

As he “wakes up” to his true self, he has to face all of the terrible acts he committed as “the Winter Soldier.” In some ways it would have been easier to remain “frozen.” As we all know, once we truly *see* something, it becomes very very hard to unsee. When we ignore what is revealed, we are led back to temptation—willful ignorance, overwork, disconnection, alcoholism, abuse. I want to say, and this may be way too simplistic, that temptation and the evil that comes from it are consequences of remaining cut off from our true selves. Bucky creates a list of atonements he must make and sets out to find the family members of those he was trained to kill. Each of these people he meets, witnessing the pain in their faces, is a path back to his humanity. Everyday he begins again, acknowledging the darkness and following the light. It is a choice he makes, and slowly, the monster within subsides. Of course this is a fictional movie...but a no less true example.

A real life example is how the church has handled human sexuality, specifically homosexuality. The denial of it, calling it evil, has done terrible damage. It is a very long shadow. Let me bring this to a very real and present example. Two young people I know quite well have been on a journey of self discovery, and that journey has brought some deep pain. Part of the inquiry is around sexuality. They were each brought up to believe that homosexuality was a sin, that it is not right with God and definitely against the teachings of Jesus. The struggle before them is—do I hold on to what I have been taught and not cause a fracture in my family and faith? Or do I follow this inquiry toward myself? If the choice is to protect the family or faith, an intergenerational act of harm persists, an aspect of self is lost, and eventually the pain of denial will deepen and continue to be dealt with in future generations.

Having been taught that homosexuality is a temptation, these young people pray for deliverance from evil. The true evil, though, is that the church has taught us that something about our very nature is bad or wrong, that we should deny it. People are literally dying because of this belief. Since the beginning of 2020, over 70 trans and non gender conforming people—mostly black and Latinx—have been murdered. Texas leads the nation in murders of trans-women of color. Currently the life expectancy of trans women is 35 years. This is not because there is something wrong with them. What pain, what absolute pain the mistranslation and misuse of this line in the Lord's Prayer has caused.

As a community we face a reckoning. Who do we want to be? We have a choice every day to be heroes or villains, for ourselves and for others. I believe the ideal community is supposed to serve the purpose of loving individuals in it into a full expression of their true selves. This is deliverance from evil, toward love. Our job is literally to hold the net so that community is a soft place to land, not a source of rejection and shame.

When we respond to the world - and I believe the world demands a response from us - from a place that is authentic but humble, vulnerable but courageous, loving but fierce, we *remake* the world and transform evil into love.

Bill:

The other night after I had turned off the lights and was heading into sleep, I had this realization: Ever since we have been offering teachings based on the Lord's Prayer, we have been referring to the work of Neil Douglas-Klotz. But, though I introduced him in here over a decade ago, I have neglected to let those who have never heard of him know anything about him.

Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz, Ph.D. is a world-renowned scholar in religious studies, spirituality and psychology. He lives in Scotland and is the author of well over a dozen books, co-authoring one with Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun many of

you would be familiar with. He is a Sufi and has written some delightful works on Sufi stories and teachings. I first discovered him through his book “Prayers of the Cosmos” which is his reflection of the Aramaic spirituality of Jesus. I own and have benefited from several of his books.

Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew and certainly not Greek. Aramaic is closer to the Hebrew language in its poetic and picturesque vocabulary. If you look Dr. Douglas-Klotz up on the internet, you can hear him read his translation of the Lord’s Prayer in Aramaic. It is quite beautiful.

I don’t remember how or when I first got onto his work but at least ten years ago. Ever since I first discovered it, his rendition of the Lord’s Prayer has been part of my own daily spiritual practice. Here it is in its entirety:

O cosmic Birther of all radiance and vibration!

Soften the ground of my being and carve out a space within me where your Presence can abide.

Fill me with your creativity so that I may be empowered to bear the fruit of your mission.

Let each of my actions bear fruit in accordance with your desire.

Endow me with the wisdom to produce and share what each being needs to grow and flourish.

Untie the tangled threads of destiny that bind me, as I release others from the entanglement of past mistakes.

Do not let me be seduced by that which would divert me from my true purpose, but illuminate the opportunities of the present moment.

For you are the ground and the fruitful vision, the birth-power and fulfillment, as all is gathered and made whole once again.

The line we are focusing on today is:

Do not let me be seduced by that which would divert me from my true purpose, but illuminate the opportunities of the present moment.

Jesus both taught in word and behavior that there is a way to walk. He referred to it as the “straight and narrow path” in contrast with a broad, spacious, careless, and mindless way. For several decades those in the Jesus movement were simply called followers of “The Way.”

Ours is a culture where delusion and distraction abound. One of my professors called what we suffer from “the sin of superficiality.”

If you are wondering what is the practical application of this, I personally believe that just having the “religious literacy” information we’ve provided today is practical. For example, it is helpful to know that for Jesus praying did not mean directing words to a god off out there somewhere. In Aramaic the word for “prayer” is more similar to our word “meditation.” It simply

meant “being open to the Sacred.” In the Christian tradition Centering Prayer comes the closest to it. We think of prayer as petitions of one sort or another being addressed to God. For Jesus it was simply being open to the loving, creative Spirit.

Being educated about the origin and meaning of teachings in our tradition is most practical because it keeps people from being led astray by some of the nonsense that parades under the banner of “Christianity” today. Crosses and Christian Flags were carried into the Capital Building on January 6. Not what Jesus had in mind!

The revived interest in atheism today as seen in the writings of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett are a direct result of these scholars seeing how the living religions of this world have drifted from their roots.

Though I think this is true of all fundamentalist movements, I confine my remarks in here to Christianity.

One gauge of the distance some have strayed from the way Jesus taught is the extent to which belief in the Bible and certain key “doctrines” have become. This is historically extremely new and not to be found in the early Jesus movement.

The Bible is a witness to faith, not an object of faith.

Doctrines are statements of personal religious experience and not litmus tests to determine who is in and who is out.

We are called in our spiritual work to re-member who we truly are and to be re-minded what we are called to do.

The guiding myth of Western culture is that of Adam and Eve. This myth says that there was once a time of pristine perfection but we humans screwed it up and we've worked to get this resolved ever since. We've lived with the mistaken identity of "original sin" and the need to be "saved." So we have to prove ourselves over and over and be sure to come out on top as winners because that proves that we are okay - at least temporarily.

Jesus did not embrace this myth. Evolutionary cosmology doesn't support it either.

We have a multitude of ways to lose traction on the path, or the way. That is, to be distracted.

One of the ways, as I just alluded to, is to be involved in competition and comparison. Rather than enjoying being, here, now, we constantly compare ourselves with some ideal or some other.

Another thing we do is hold back, play it safe, don't take risks.

And, of course, we keep busy.

Most people are taught to be their worst critics rather than to offer themselves loving kindness and compassion. We are to love others, as we love ourselves. What I have come to believe is that I can love you only as much as I love myself. And, further, I can allow you to love me only to the degree that I love myself.

I think the worst, at least the most unwise and un-useful thing, we do is focus on other people's faults.

Living life as people who are aware that they are created in the image of God and not out of the deficiency of believing that there is something fundamentally wrong with us, this is the path we are called to walk.

It is our custom on Sunday afternoon to go to the Whole Foods that is in our neighborhood. We've done this for years.

Some time ago as I was checking out a very attractive woman was scanning my items. She was a shapely woman. And, to make matters more distracting, she had on a low cut top. And to make matters even more complicated, like many of the employees of Whole Foods, she had a tattoo. This was unlike any body art I had seen.

Running from one side of her chest to the other was the nativity scene; like you see on a Christmas card. A star was on one side sending out rays of light down to the other where there was a manger and, I'm assuming, the manger with the Christ child in it a bit further down. That, I couldn't see. Above it all were the words: "Child of God." I stood there staring like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights.

My staring became so obvious that I had to say something. I said - actually, I stammered, "That's the most unusual tattoo I've ever seen." She looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Mister, if you're going to put a tattoo here, you better be careful what it says."

If we could be see those words on everybody: child of God. If we could see these words, "child of God," written on our own bodies and believe them.

Jesus taught that we, if we were to be known as his followers, must learn to see them written on every one.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.