

Wormwood Walks¹

L3-20, March 15, 2020
Mk 12:1-12

The Rev. Dr. Chris Hagen
Lake Nokomis L. Ch., Mpls

Evil has shown its hand.

With particular skill,

evil hides its deeds and seduces humans with enticing fruits,
while all we see

is suspicion, disadvantage, another's gain at our expense, envy, anxiety.

With particular skill,

evil hides its machinations with self-doubt,
with accusations of "something wrong with me,"
hides its deeds behind human frailties and insecurities.

Using one's position and economic power to keep wages low, *appears fair*.

Absentee landlord concerned only with the rent arriving on time, *seems normal*.

Excessive punishment pretending to be deterrent, *seems logical*.

Evil hides its machinations in deluded sense of fairness, corrupted normalcy and cruel logic.

Jesus is confronted by community leaders

who do not like the policies he's proposing.

Jesus is confronted by chief priests, scribes and elders (11:27)

who do not like his demonstrations and teachings
that all have a right to food security (8:1-9),
a right to health (9:14-29), wealth equality (9:17-22).

So he tells a parable about an absentee landlord.

A wealthy person from another country set up a vineyard as an investment.

He hired tenants to work the vines and produce cash crops.

The chief priests, scribes and elders hearing this story identify with the wealthy landlord

because they themselves are landlords and draw wealth from the labors of others.

It was only fair that the landlord punish the greedy tenants with violence and destruction.

They themselves have to be tough on renters.

Evil has shown its hand.

Ownership has corrupted into entitlement.

Position and power has shaped their worldview

until chief priests, scribes and elders pitted themselves against their own employees.

Then Jesus turns the tables.

Quoting Psalm 118, Jesus accuses the chief priests, scribes and elders

as being the evil tenants, abusing their position,
assuming ownership of what is not theirs,
and doing violence upon God's own messengers.

Jesus flips the story and the chief priests, scribes and elders

have become tenants taking what it not their own,
abusing servants and claiming for themselves.

Evil has show its hand,

twisting truth and making normal what is contrary to life.

Every Sunday, and whenever you pray the Lord's Prayer,

we include the petition, "lead us not into temptation, and *deliver us from evil...*"

We beg God "lead us not into temptation,"

to not let us succumb to temptation to sin that comes *from within ourselves*.

And we beg God "deliver us from evil," from the sin that comes upon us *from without*.

It is this last that I bring to attention.

¹ With reference to C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*.

Praying “deliver us from evil,” is asking God, in God’s mercy,
to bring us through all the hardship and injustice and wrong
that is going on in the world and is now falling upon ourselves.
Praying “deliver us from evil,” is recognizing that the harm and struggle and pain of this life
is caused by forces beyond our control.
Not all that goes wrong is our fault!
Struggles and hardships and setbacks are not all because of our dereliction or defect.
There is *evil* afoot beyond our cause or control.
Some things are larger than our ability.
So we must pray, “God in heaven, deliver us from evil,”
for the evil at play is more than anyone can confront.

Evil has show its hand once again.
Evil has shown its hand.
Coronavirus pandemic has become larger than any person can handle,
larger than any nation can handle.
Our president can’t control it.
Medical scientists and doctors can’t cure it.
Policies and practices can’t confine it.
This *evil* has blown bigger than human ability.
Now I don’t speak of “evil” as some bogeyman or embodiment.
Evil is *a force, a movement, a hidden provocation*
that crushes hope, destroys community, wreaks havoc, isolates people.
Evil is a force of destruction that is more than property loss or health issue.
Evil is a force that strikes fear,
immobilizes compassion,
isolates and picks us off one by one with hopelessness,
breaks down social order.
Coronavirus pandemic is doing that now.
It is *evil afoot*.
It strikes our soul through concern for health.
It segregates us from one another out of caution.
It shrinks us in fear.
And so we must pray, “God in heaven, deliver us from evil, *this* evil.”
Deliver us from separation.
Deliver us from fear.
Deliver us from panic.
Deliver us from irrational actions.

Evil was afoot that day in Jerusalem
when Jesus was dragged to the cross,
horrendous violence and vitriolic anger infected them all.
On that day God said to us and all the world’s generations that evil will not stand,
God’s love endures,
even the vicious death of crucifixion, it’s destruction and instrument of despair,
will not stop love.
Evil pandemic may strike us all,
but it will not stop love, *it must not stop our love*.

Proper hygiene is a must.
Caution must be observed regarding contact.
Handwashing 20 seconds, added use of sanitizer, careful touching, cleaning surfaces are all necessary.
Don’t go into public if you’re feeling “off” or having symptoms.
Take care around those most susceptible.
All these we must do.

But I am saying also, *guard your soul*.
 Do not let this evil unleashed drive you into isolation.
 Do not let this evil deprive you of connection and friendship.
 Do not let this evil lead you into panic, fear, depression or despair.

There are some practical steps to take to guard *your soul* along with your health.
 First, pray *the Lord's Prayer*,
 giving weight to the petition, "lead us not into sin, and deliver us from evil,"
 what "deliver us from evil" means in this time.

Pray for your friends and those vulnerable.
 Prayer does have power.
 Such prayer takes us out of ourselves and connects us to a bigger world.
 Praying for others reminds us that we are part of larger humanity,
 part of the lives of others, part of a world that is dear to God.
 Praying for friends, those vulnerable, the world,
 keeps us among humanity and brings us out of contracted concern for only self.

Another step to take to guard your soul along with your health
 is to keep in touch with one another.
 Professionals are telling us to avoid crowds and stay out of the public,
 and maybe that is wise in the short term.
 But that does not mean avoid contact.
 Use this time to call up someone you have not heard from in a while.
 Telephone calls do not spread coronavirus.
 Call friends often.
 Connect by email, Facebook, send photos from your phone.
 God has given us technology to use against evil that would isolate.
 Check in on our elderly and homebound.
 Call the person who usually sits next to you in the pew and say,
 "Just calling to see how you are."

This coming week,
 Erica and I will see what devotion and prayer links we might post on the church website.
 When you do not feel safe among the congregation in worship
 you can check the church website for daily devotions.
 Will Awe posts recordings of Sunday sermons on YouTube.
 Sundays sermons are posted in written form on the church website.
 Luther Seminary has a rich resource of devotions, prayers and Bible helps
 on its website.
 They are excellent ways to connect with God and others
 when it seems to risky to be in public.

And counter the messages you are getting from the media,
 with reflection and pause.
 Remember that what is broadcast on TV is meant to sway your mind,
 is meant to make you think in a particular way.
 Media has motive to shape your thinking.
 Balance their messages
 with time-out for thought.
 Hysteria foams out of uncritical thinking.
 Prayer, finding footing in God by bringing specific concerns in prayer,
 is antidote to hysteria, fear and isolation.
 It gives us space to think twice about what we are being told.
 Prayer takes us out of ourselves
 and places us in God's care.

There is evil afoot.
Not a person, not organized malevolence or twisted ideology
 but a force that influences thought and disintegrates community.
It is using a disease, a pandemic to disrupt society and drive people apart.
It uses a truth as a starting place to wreak havoc.
It is true that coronavirus is a serious disease unleashed on the world.
It is true that we all must take precautions to avoid bringing risk to each other.
But it must not be allowed to discourage, deprive or destroy
Love that finds a way to support and connect while we stay safe,
 love that resists fear and resists despair,
 love that takes action to hope and action to care
 will save our souls in this time of danger.
God's love does not give in.
Prayer that brings perspective.
Prayer that brings calm.
Love that is action seeking to connect still.
Love that acts to support and encourage
 when so much wants to isolate and divide.
Prayer and active love will guard our soul from evil afoot.
Amen.