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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Matthew 17: 14-20; Matthew 6:9-13
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“Deliver Us From Evil”

What I wish to offer today amounts to an extended meditation on words we say every week in our worship service in the Lord’s Prayer: “But deliver us from evil.” For reasons that I’ll get into shortly, it’s a phrase that’s been on my mind lately. In order to get to the deliverance, however, I’m going to begin in a difficult place, and then build out from there. I’m telling you this so that you won’t flinch, or go away prematurely. Should you ever find yourself wondering in the moments to come, it’s the deliverance that I’m after.

One of the all-time great concert films emerged in 1970, called Gimme Shelter. It’s a documentary about the Altamont Free Concert of 1969, particularly of the Rolling Stones’ headlining concert in the evening. Altamont is a notorious event that effectively canceled any remaining idealism still left in the 60’s. Disorganization, too many substances, and the presence of a vigilante posse with license to do as they pleased – the Hell’s Angels had been invited to provide security for the event - proved to be a toxic stew. Throughout the afternoon, fights began breaking out near the stage when the Hell’s Angels pushed back against fans. When Mick Jagger arrived at the stadium, someone punched him in the face. Another band was attacked onstage. The Stones decided to press on despite the ugly hostilities, but as their set came to a close a small coterie of fans tried to rush the stage. In the resulting melee, one of the Hell’s Angels drew a knife and stabbed one of those fans. The concert ended in chaos.

In an online essay about the film, one writer placed two stills side by side in an attempt to juxtapose the social forces that were at play that day in California. One depicts a young man in costume, in cosplay, dressed as a kind of hippie wizard or magician. The man has a star on his forehead, and he’s wearing a blue polka-dotted cape, an emblem of 60’s innocence. The second depicts a Hell’s Angel in mid swing with one of the weighted pool cues they all brought to the event, an image of something nasty and brutish being unleashed. The tag line beneath each photo is: “This (showing the man dressed as a magician) is not a man culturally prepared to deal with this (showing the biker brandishing his weapon).

Those two images have stayed with me for more than a decade, because they capture something important about society, and something important about church and theology as well. Quite often churches and cultural theorists alike project an image of goodness onto the world, while failing to account for, or reckon with, some of the more troubling features of the human soul, and of human society. That can be especially true of liberal Protestant churches and theologies. We tend to look back with embarrassment upon our Calvinist and Puritan ancestors, thinking they overreacted when they gazed at the human heart, and found wickedness there. I often do. I prefer sunnier precincts, like Genesis 1, where it is said that God looked upon the world, and it was good. I prefer to dwell upon the possibilities that exist within the human soul, appealing to the better angels within us. I prefer not to think in apocalyptic terms, and I shy away from designations like “evil.” I’d rather deploy categories such as the tragic, or human fallibility, or

moral failure, to describe negative human behaviors. While Protestant liberalism doesn't shy away from confronting social suffering and oppression, it's not often that I, or anyone within that tradition will speak of sheer human malevolence. We'll speak of misunderstandings, or mistakes, or culpable error. But we won't speak of evil. That seems a step too far for many of us in polite society.

There are times that I sense we, as predominantly white Protestant liberals, are something like the man dressed in that wizard's cape. There are times when I begin to suspect that we're not culturally prepared to deal with the unchecked violence of the biker brandishing the pool cue. I wonder, at times, if that's rendered us, and people like us, unable to confront some of the more troubling features of human life, unable to perceive the depth of the problem before us. It leaves us shocked and disoriented when an occupant of high office peddles lies, when an event like January 6th takes place, and when evidence of police brutality against people of color continues to mount. At some level, we become the man at Altamont in cosplay: unable to fathom what it is we're confronting in the world.

Those were some of the things rolling about my mind this past week when the verdict was read in the Derek Chauvin trial. I felt enormous relief at the verdict. Nothing can reverse what happened to George Floyd, and nothing can change the deadly outcome for far too many people of color when they encounter police. But it was a relief to know that in this one instance at least, justice was served.

Nevertheless, after absorbing the news for a while, I spent a long time, more time than I care to admit, staring at images of Derek Chauvin. I studied his eyes as they flicked nervously back and forth as the verdict was read. I looked at what seemed an inscrutable visage during the trial itself – his face revealed no emotion. I watched his face on that awful day last May, as he casually knelt on George Floyd. I looked at his mugshot, and spent time toggling back and forth between that image and images from the courtroom – looking at his hair, his choice of clothing, his demeanor when he was handcuffed and led away. In most of the images I looked at, the man seemed benign, a little bewildered, kind of scared. He looked entirely ordinary. It was something like Hannah Arendt's observation at the trial of Adolf Eichmann – the sense of a suburban bureaucratic man doing his job, following orders, doing as he had been trained to do. He seemed not monstrous, but banal, as if he'd just stepped out of the Men's Warehouse. Still, one young woman who survived an encounter with Chauvin, during which he had pressed his knee into her neck in a manner identical with what happened to George Floyd, had this to say: "That man – that's evilness right there."

For myself, I'm unable to tell whether the man himself is evil, down in the core of his being, or if it's his actions that were evil. Of the latter, I'm certain. Of the former, I'm unsure. Even so, whether she knew it or not, the woman who spoke those words was pointing to a truth that many of our best artists and intellectuals have tried to flesh out: the touch of evil that sometimes becomes manifest in a human soul, or in social forces. Shakespeare did so when he created Iago, who manipulates Othello into murdering his beloved. Milton did so when he created his Satan, resentful that he was passed over by God for promotion among the angelic hosts. Melville did so in Ahab, and in the character of John Claggart, the master at arms in *Billy Budd*. Mark Twain did so in *The Mysterious Stranger*, a late career masterpiece, and more recently, Cormac

McCarthy did so as well, in the character Judge Holden from *Blood Meridian*, and Anton Chigurh, from *No Country for Old Men*. It's true, there's something particularly male about this form of imagination, and there may be something excessive and overwrought in the depictions each of these writers convey. But they're also pushing us to think carefully about human life, challenging us to avoid both sentimentality and naivete when it comes to our imagination of the human soul. The woman who survived her encounter with the Minneapolis police officer was doing just that: warning against a naivete that winds up coming close to complicity. Failing to account for evil as evil can be a way of excusing it.

It's instructive to note that as MLK was preparing for the Birmingham Campaign in 1963, one of the things he did was to make a study of evil.¹ He was about to unleash a great struggle upon that city, one that would test a great many people. King and his associates would go head to head with Bull Connor, and his police force. They would wind up beaten, and in jail. Children would be subjected to firehoses and dogs. The full weight of the law would be brought to bear upon the movement for civil rights. A storm was coming. King knew it, and he made his preparations. Bull Connor knew it was coming as well, and he too made his preparations. Connor, like King, was a church going man. He had a pastor. I don't know what sorts of sermons that pastor preached while Connor and his family sat in the pews, but I do know that prior to the Birmingham confrontation, that pastor urged upon Connor a diplomatic restraint, in the interest of preserving order. That's a tried and true tactic of Christian churches.

Not so King. He studied the reality, and the tactics, of evil. What he didn't do in that moment was to champion ideas of moral progress. He didn't offer reassurances about the innate goodness of all people. He didn't rhapsodize about the beauty of the natural world and he didn't appeal to the better angels of humanity, focusing on compassion or hospitality or any of the other tropes familiar to progressive Christians. To be clear, there was room in King's theology for all of those themes, but there was also an impatience with the sentimentality, naivete, and cheerful optimism that so often characterizes liberal Christianity. What was required before marching into Birmingham was a study not of human goodness and decency, but of evil. For only in studying it well could King hope to be delivered of it.

He preached on that subject at Ebenezer Baptist in March of 1963 just before launching the Birmingham Campaign, in a sermon entitled "The Answer to a Perplexing Question." The question under consideration is the one we heard earlier, when the disciples ask Jesus why they could not cast out an evil spirit. We tend to hear such passages with a touch of condescension – as if the disciples had encountered mental illness, say, and had foolishly regarded it as an evil spirit. King helps to redirect our imagination, so that evil means just that – malice, intent to harm, the sowing of confusion and discord for pleasure. Those aspects of the human character are real – the Bible knows it, and King knew it too. And so when the disciples find they cannot cast out the evil spirit, they're discovering what many people have discovered when confronting racism, say, or colonialism, or sexism: something powerfully rooted in human character, which can't simply be yanked up or otherwise mollified. Liberal reason can't touch it, nor can science, nor can vague notions of human progress or social uplift. It requires a different kind of solution.

¹ See *Parting the Waters*, by Taylor Branch (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), pgs. 700-702.

What's most remarkable, and frankly surprising, about King's sermon is his refusal to locate evil somewhere "out there." It's not to be found, principally, in slavery or the Holocaust or nuclear warfare – or on the Birmingham police force for that matter. Instead, it's a feature of the soul to which we are all subject. It's the simple addiction that grows more tenacious, until it finally overcomes all positive intent. It's the innocent habit that takes over one's life slowly, until at last it becomes something alien, something overpowering the will – alien, in other words, but as human as a toothache. It's the drive to simply do one's job adequately – even if the job requires excessive force, or violence. It's the impulse to fit in with a group, and to not ask critical questions, least of all of yourself. It's the willingness to accept a version of reality as given, as the way it is, rather than questioning how particular social arrangements came to be. It starts with something innocent, something small, but it quickly builds to something far more insidious, and overpowering. In such moments, human will is confronted with something intractable, a moment in which, like the disciples, one says, "Why could I not cast the demon out?"

In such situations, the task, King argues, is to allow the energy of God to be set loose within human souls, a partnership between humans and the divine in which the struggles of everyday life are used to transform the intractable evils that confront us. The task, in other words, is first to recognize ourselves in the abhorrent image of the evil "other," and then to allow that aspect of our souls to be transformed by God. This can happen. It does happen. In such a way, Simon of Sand became Peter the Rock. In such a way, Persecuting, hateful Saul become the Apostle Paul. Thus it is that the sex-addicted Augustine became Saint Augustine. These were examples of individuals who had redirected their inner torments so as to produce public, historical miracles, which were social in nature. That seems to be what King was contemplating as he asked his congregation to face into the realities of Birmingham: to allow their inner conflicts to be transformed into a historical miracle, where their resentments, their fear, their anguish, and their private failures could be transformed into powerful bulwarks against the evil they would soon confront. While that transformation offered no guarantee that the perpetrators of harm, those inflicting evil, would themselves be transformed, it offered the possibility of such – to those inflicting harm in that moment, but also perhaps to those who would witness the event, or study it later. In that regard, it's worth noting that while Bull Connor himself remained unrepentant for the remainder of his life, his children and grandchildren have since undergone a process of reckoning that amounts to a repudiation of the evil their father and grandfather deployed. It might take time – a long time – but that's what King meant when he spoke of a partnership between the human and the divine. And it's something of what Jesus meant when he said that with but a little faith, you can move mountains. For all its intractability, King gives us to know that we do have power to withstand evil. There remains, then, a promise of deliverance from evil.

I'd like to close with one final insight. Ervin Staub is a Holocaust survivor who lives and teaches up in Amherst, and he's spent his life thinking about the psychology of good and evil. If it's true that humans are capable of inflicting great harm on one another, then might it also be true, he wondered, that humans are capable of instilling goodness in one another as well? If groupthink, routinization, and dominance of others are all too prevalent, ought it not be possible to create norms in which humans intervene before harm occurs, thus preventing an outbreak of evil? Staub's work, like King's, acknowledges the propensity of human beings toward groupthink, toward peer conformity, and toward routinization. But also like King, he sensed that

those tendencies might be harnessed toward the good, so that peer conformity might be transformed into peer intervention. Imagine what might have happened if such norms had governed the police on the day George Floyd was murdered, or on the day Daunte Wright was shot? Not only would tragic mistakes be prevented, but the very tendencies unleashed upon the world by individuals intent on harm would be severely curtailed. That insight led Dr. Staub to create the notion of active bystandership, where human beings learn to intervene with one another, before harm is done, before evil becomes unspooled. Indeed, that insight is being adopted by police agencies as well as anti-racist activists, who are using Dr. Staub's understanding of Active Bystandership to transform the possibilities contained within the human soul, and of society itself. You can learn more about it by watching the presentation about ABLE, Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement, on our website. It's but one instance of allowing the propensity toward evil to be overturned, and transformed, by the good.

I've warned against the habit among liberal Protestants of remaining naïve about the presence of evil in the world, and I don't wish to end with what might be construed as naïve. No one, least of all Jesus, promised that evil could be eliminated from the face of the earth. Still less can it be eliminated from the human soul. That's a dream that usually results in another form of butchery, as evil is identified as somewhere "out there," waiting to be expelled. Jesus, like King, like Dr. Staub, and like so many of our best artists and writers, is realistic about the human propensity to do harm, including our own propensity toward it. The biker with the pool cue and crooked cops, to say nothing of the Iagos and Judge Holdens of the world – they exist, out there and in here. But the promise given to us in the Lord's Prayer, and by so many other examples from human history, is that even if evil can't be removed from the face of the earth, it can be transformed, and it can be overcome by the power of the good. We are not without hope. Trusting in the power of God at work within us and within the world, we can be delivered.