

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
5/28/06

The following Scripture is a prayer that Jesus made on behalf of his disciples. After his death, resurrection and ascension, the disciples would, in a sense, be on their own. Who would protect them? How could they remain faithful in the middle of persecution and deceit? This prayer answers these questions.

In John 17:6-19 (NRSV) we read what Jesus prayed,

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

[7] Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; [8] for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

[9] I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. [10] All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

[11] And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. [12] While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. [13] But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

[14] I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

[15] I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

[16] They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

[17] Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

[18] As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

[19] And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

THE SEARCH FOR PROTECTION

Protection, that's what many people want. In fact, protection is big business. This past week our building and grounds committee talked with a man who offered to treat our building for termites. What was his main product? It wasn't some sort of insecticide that kills termites, although he was selling that.

Primarily he was offering the church protection against structural damage. We could sleep at night because we would know that the building would be covered by a bond. Even if the worst happened, even if the integrity of the building was threatened by an infestation of termites, their company would stand behind their service.

The promise of protection is a powerful sales tool.

Recently a young lady came to our house and talked about protective window coverings for our house. Part of her sales pitch was a video demonstrating the devastation caused by hurricane Charlie.

If only these houses had been covered by our product, they wouldn't have sustained such terrible damage. Can we really afford not to protect our biggest investment?

Not long after she arrived the salesman from Brinks paid a visit. You can't afford to be without our protection. Our alarm system is monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If we bought the system our insurance company would give us a break on our rate.

And so it goes throughout the week. People offer us protection against any problem that can arise. There is life insurance, flood insurance, disability

insurance and mortgage insurance. The cards, letters and especially phone calls just keep on coming.

Now don't misunderstand. Many if not all of these products can be quite helpful. Some of us found out just how wonderful insurance can be after the hurricane season of 2004.

But, we also know that even the best products and the best insurance cannot protect us all the time. A random act of violence, an accident or a violent storm can change our lives in a New York minute. No matter how hard we try there is no way to really protect ourselves and the ones we love completely.

And yet we desperately want that protection.

FAITH AND PROTECTION

That's why many people turn to religion. They want protection for this life and the life to come. I guess you might call it a different kind of fire insurance policy!

The followers of Jesus Christ are offered protection, but it is different from the protection that most people seek. Jesus does not protect us from flood, fire and theft. Jesus does not tell us that our enemies will do us no harm.

On the contrary, Jesus told his disciples again and again that they would be persecuted just as he was persecuted. According to tradition most of the disciples were martyred for the faith. We have no reason to question that tradition. Church history is filled with examples of people who lost everything because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

If Jesus Christ is an insurance policy, it seems to me that we are due a refund.

And yet some people still insist on thinking of Jesus in this way. In fact people often leave the church because they are angry with God. Difficulties have come their way and God did not deliver them as they hoped He would.

They prayed. They tithed. They attended church services. Why didn't God answer them in their hour of need? What good is religion if it doesn't make life easier for me?

Followers of Jesus do not have it easier than anyone else. As I said, believers have often been persecuted terribly for their faith.

But, it would be wrong to think that this means that God just doesn't care. We learn through Jesus that God does care. We learn through the life of Jesus that God suffers for us and with us, that God even dies for us.

PROTECTED BY THE TRUTH

And we also learn through Jesus that God offers us protection, not protection from the problems of life but protection from falsehood. According to Jesus the greatest threat to our life is not termites, hurricanes or the heartbreak of psoriasis. Indeed, even death itself has lost its sting in light of the resurrection. (See 1 Corinthians 15)

The great enemy from which we need protection is that enemy called falsehood. We need to be protected from lies. Indeed, Satan is known as the great deceiver. The Evil One is the Father of All Lies. And it is the lie that can take away our very soul.

In today's lesson from gospel of John, Jesus prays that his disciples will be protected and sanctified by the truth. Again I remind you that this passage is a part of the so called farewell discourse. Jesus will soon be leaving his disciples. He will ascend into heaven leaving his disciples alone here on earth. And like a father who wants the best for his children, Jesus wants the best for his disciples.

But, how could he protect them from the trials that were to come?

Jesus would entrust their lives to the truth, the truth of God. This truth was revealed in Jesus' life and teachings.

LIVING THE TRUTH

In his prayer Jesus acknowledges that the disciples now understand more about the kingdom. They have received the very message of God through him. And he prays that they will be sanctified by that truth. In other words, Jesus wants his disciples' lives to be transformed by the message of the gospel.

It was not just about preaching the truth. It was also about living the truth in the middle of a world of lies.

Notice that Jesus does not pray for his disciples to be taken out of the world. In fact just the opposite is true. Jesus prayed, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." John 17:15 (NRSV) Jesus prays that his disciples will be protected from the evil one or (as it can also be translated) evil.

It's ironic. We worry about needing protection from so many things ... protection for our health, our wealth and the ones we love. But, we often pay little attention to the thing that threatens our life the most, evil.

What do we pray each week when we repeat the Lord's Prayer? "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

That's not just an archaic phrase that we keep out of tradition. Evil exists. It is real. And it resides wherever lies are found. Like the disciples for whom Jesus prayed long ago, discipleship does not take us out of this world. We still live very much in this world and because of that we struggle. We struggle with the evil in our world, the evil in our church and the evil in our own lives.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

This past week Kenneth Lay was convicted of fraud and will more than likely spend the rest of his life in jail. What kind of man was Ken Lay?

I hear that he was a very likeable fellow. He was a leader in the Methodist Church but he could have just as well been a leader in the Presbyterian Church. He seemed like the kind of guy you would want in your church.

Many said that he wanted the best for his employees. He talked about maintaining the highest moral principles.

And yet this nice man was seduced by a lie. He thought that he could hide the truth about his company through fancy bookkeeping. He thought that he could separate his religious life from matters that were “strictly business”.

He didn't think about the fact that the decisions we make can have great influence on the lives of others. He didn't make the connection between what he believed as a Christian and what he was called to do in the board room. Many people lost their life savings and their pensions because of what happened at Enron.

The truth came out, and in this case it didn't set him free. It was heartbreaking to see the sorrow on the faces of the family and on his face. He struggled to make sense of it all by quoting Scripture saying that he believed that somehow “all things work together for good.”

I think this should serve as an example to us all. Even a kind, bright, well educated church leader can be seduced by the power of evil, and we are in the same danger. All of us are in danger of being seduced by the lies that surround us.

The Ken Lay saga is a spectacular example of the danger of living a lie, but it is certainly not the only example. Many of us do not connect what we profess on Sunday with what we do during the week.

We are very much in the world. We are tempted every day to separate business from faith.

LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS

How can we be in the world without being of the world? How do we avoid taking the path of the ill fated disciple Judas who betrayed his Master for a paltry sum of money?

The word of God as revealed in Jesus must be our guide, our only rule of faith and practice. We too must be sanctified by the truth. It is the truth that will protect us from evil and from ourselves.

As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans,
“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

That’s much easier said than done. We don’t want to be transformed. We want to conform. We want to fit in. It’s just easier and safer.

Sometimes lies can be very attractive because they are what we want to hear, and the truth can be a bitter pill to swallow. According to the Bible, we do not want the truth. The truth is not easy to handle. But, the truth will set us free.

ALL HAVE SINNED

And the hard truth begins with this statement,
“All have sinned and fall short ...” (Romans 3:23)

John wrote in his first letter,
“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Denying who we are and what we are can be deadly. It is the one thing that can separate us from God’s grace; it is the deadly lie that we are innocent.

I’ve found a new show on TV that I love. It’s called the Dog Whisperer, and it’s about a man who has the ability to help people with their problem dogs.

But, the catch is this. The dogs are not really the problem. The people are the problem. The dog owners have certain psychological needs that they are trying to fulfill through their dog.

This does not help the dog. In fact it just makes the dog “crazy” because they are not allowing the dog to be a dog. And in particular, they are not giving the dog the discipline that it needs.

And so in order to help control the behavior of the dog, the Dog Whisperer must first help the owners control their own behavior. He does this by challenging them to admit their own fears and needs. If the dog owners can't admit the truth about themselves, they cannot find salvation from their "problem" dog.

In a much greater way, the first step of salvation is for us to admit the truth about ourselves, the hard truth that we keep locked away in the deep recesses of our mind. We must learn to quit deceiving ourselves about the presence of sin in our lives.

GRACE THAT IS GREATER

How can we do this?

How can we dare to admit this difficult truth about ourselves?

We can dare to tell the difficult truth about ourselves by remembering that there is a greater truth than the fact that all have sinned and fall short of God's standards.

Yes, all of us fall short when it comes to God's standards and most of us fall short even when it comes to our own standards. We're not the men and women we should be.

But, if we are willing to face that hard fact, there is salvation.

John wrote in his first letter that if say we have no sin we "deceive ourselves and the truth is not us," but he also wrote this, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

The grace of God is greater than our sin. Remember the words to that old hymn, "Grace, grace, marvelous grace ... grace that is greater than all our sin?" Grace is a power that is greater than our sin; grace is a salvation that is stronger than our failure.

We confess our sin knowing that we are in the hands of a gracious God, the God revealed in his Son, Jesus. That is truth with a capital T. Grace

triumphs over everything, and grace protects us from those who would use our guilt and fears to manipulate us.

William Barclay tells a story about a famous evangelist. His name was Brownlow North, and the life he lived was anything but Christian. Once, just before he was to enter the pulpit in a church in Aberdeen, he received a letter that detailed a shameful series of events that he had been engaged in.

North's stomach turned as he read all that he had done in black and white. The letter concluded by saying, "If you have the gall to preach tonight, I'll stand and expose you."

North took the letter and went to his knees.
And a few minutes later he was in the pulpit.

He began his message by reading the letter from start to finish. And he said, "I want to make it clear that this letter is perfectly true. I am ashamed of what I have done. And I come tonight not as one who is perfect, but as one who is forgiven."

Barclay said that God used that letter and the balance of his ministry almost as a magnet to bring people to Jesus.

AVOIDING PRIDE

I had the privilege of meeting with the new chaplain at Good Samaritan Village this past week. Pastor Jack started a new program called "Ask the Pastor" in which he endeavors to answer any questions the residents may have about the Christian faith.

Recently someone asked, "What is pride and how do we avoid it?"

Jack said that he spent quite a bit of time researching that question and found that pride is considered to be one of the seven deadly sins. In fact it is the deadliest of sins because all other sins seem to come from this one sin.

I would have to agree with his answer, but I would also want to know this, "What are the roots of this sin? Why are we proud?"

I think that we are filled with pride because we do not have an appreciation of how sin crouches at our own door. It is easy for us to talk about the sins of others, but it is not so easy to acknowledge our own sin.

Indeed, talking about the so-called sins of others has often been a popular way to achieve political goals. Power hungry greed is often cloaked in religious garb. Religion without humility is a very dangerous thing. It can lead to great evil because it is based on a lie.

We need to meditate on the truth, the truth about ourselves and the truth about the gospel.

I wonder what it would be like if someone would write a letter to me like the one that was written to Brownlow North. Suppose my secret sins were exposed for the whole world to see?

Would I have the courage to acknowledge that the letter was true and empower the grace of God to change my life? Or would I let guilt and deception continue to hold sway in my life?

When a person takes an oath in court, they promise to tell the “truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” That seems like such a simple thing to do. But, it is not. It requires courage, and it requires the grace of God.

May we be changed and protected by the Truth.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN