

May 24, 2009

Seventh Sunday of Easter (John 17:6-19)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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The New Yorker magazine comes to our house each and every week. On the day that it arrives, before I even glance at any of the articles, the very first thing I do is flip through it and read all of the cartoons. I appreciate the humor, but it also serves as a good barometer-reading of where we are as a country – it doesn't give the news headlines, but the cartoons frequently point to what the real issues and struggles are that we are wrestling with. It's not that I don't already have a sense of this, but the cartoons reassure me that I am not alone, that others are reacting and responding to our current situation in much of the same way as I am.

This week's New Yorker had a cartoon with an executive sitting in a large chair, behind a long desk with a nice city view in the background. There is a man standing in front of the executive's desk with his head hanging down as the executive says, "I've finally learned not to measure my worth by how many employees I have."

On the page facing this cartoon there's another cartoon with two men looking stranded on a small island with a palm tree. One man has a two bottles on the ground behind him and has just picked-up another bottle and pulled out a piece of paper and he says to his buddy, "I wish they'd quit sending my financial statements."

A couple of pages later I read a third cartoon. There are three down-trodden people with signs hanging around their necks standing up against a brick wall. The title over the cartoon says "Les Nouveau Pauvres" - the new poor. The first guy's sign says "Not going away this summer" the lady's sign says "didn't buy those boots" and the third person's sign says "in the 'poor' mind-set". The cartoons are funny, but reading all three of these cartoons in a row made my anxiety jump-up three notches. It struck me how much the darkness, despair and anxiety has crept in to our collective mindset.

We don't talk much about evil in the Episcopal Church, but I think it is hard to avoid acknowledging in our current climate that evil and darkness are present in our world. Even though we try to protect ourselves and our families – evil and darkness are having an effect on our individual lives. And for some of us this may call into question our understanding of God.

Joyce was my sister's best friend from college. She was a very smart woman, and an incredibly thoughtful and kind friend. My first semester at college she sent me a care-package including a warm wool sweater to help me survive the Maine winter weather, and a coupon for a pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream to share with my new friends. Joyce adopted me as her own little sister. While she was in college and graduate school,

she celebrated several Christmas' at our house because she didn't have enough time off and it was too expensive for her to fly to the West Coast to be with her family. Joyce put herself through Georgetown Law School, working while she went to school. She was driven and determined, but she never lost sight of what was important and she was very generous with her time and with the gifts that God had given her.

The year after I graduated from college, Joyce was abducted from DuPont Circle in Washington, D.C. and three months later was found murdered. Her death had a profound effect on me. Throughout those three months and for many months after her death, I found myself angry at God. How could God let this happen to Joyce? She was a good person and she was on the trajectory towards being able to make a real difference in the world through her work. Why didn't God protect her and guard her from this evil? All that I felt about God at that time was an overwhelming anger, and I think I felt betrayed. I didn't realize it at the time, but my functional theology- what I believed about God and how God acted in the world- was that if a person is good, does what is right, is faithful both in word and practice, then they will be rewarded with a good life and will be protected by God. But the evil had crept into my world and not only taken away my friend, but that experience of evil had forced me to face my functional theology and I realized that this "theology of exchange" or "theology of merit" -- good behavior on my part in exchange for God's protection and love -- this theology was my own human construct, and not actually true to all that I had experienced of God in my life. My functional theology limited the experience God's grace and love to whether a person was worthy of it. This theology also assumed that God would intervene when a person chose to exercise their free will in a perverted way, causing harm to others. This painful experience helped me to realize that we live in a broken world in which evil does exist, and being in relationship with God, even right relationship does not prevent us from experiencing the evil in our lives.

As Jesus prepares to leave his disciples, he prays to God on behalf of them. He asks for unity for them, that they will share in the joy of eternal life, but he also asks for their protection from the influence of evil. He never prays that his disciples will not experience the evil. He knows that the disciples are in the world, a world that is broken - a world in which evil exists and has influence. The disciples are not just in the world, but they are of the world - they are not like Jesus, who came into the world, but was not of the world. And so Jesus prays for protection from the influence of evil. He prays for us that we will remember and turn towards God's abundant and life-giving love. Jesus prays that we will be guided by that experience of grace and not let our hearts be invaded by the evil that still surrounds our lives. Today we as a society are faced with the evil of corruption and greed, the pursuit of wealth over the well-being of human lives, of families. More and more of us face foreclosure or unemployment and uncertainty about our financial well-being. More and more of us worry whether we will be able to make the next tuition payment to our child's college, and keep a roof over our heads and put food on the table for our families. And in this anxiety, in those moments of terror we may find ourselves questioning God, angry at God for allowing this to happen, allowing the darkness and destruction to come into our lives. We are good people. Why is this happening to us?

But even now in this time of darkness and despair in our collective lives together God is reaching out to us with abundant love. That right relationship that we share with God may not protect the evil from coming into our lives, but that experience of right relationship does protect us from being influenced by the evil as time and again we choose God's abundant love over anything else that is put before us. God not only desires us to choose love over evil, but we are to continue Jesus' ministry of sharing the good news of God's abundant, life-giving love offered for the world.

In drawing us back into right relationship with God, Jesus has given us the tools to resist the evil that exists in our world. This is the functional theology that we profess here at All Saints': we share in God's abundant love as we gather around this table together each and every week. Through being in right relationship with God and experiencing the fullness of God's grace, we are free - free to love more fully, more completely, more abundantly, having felt that same love offered to us. So now we go out into the world to share that love - with our neighbors, with our friends, with our enemies, with all we meet.

In this time of darkness, we are called to be more the church, to go out into the world and push back the darkness and shine the light of the good news of God's love for us. Last week we focused on Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us. Geoffrey reminded us that love requires presence. It means that we set aside our anxieties and show-up, be fully present with one another. Whether that is in bringing a meal to someone who is sick or to a family who is struggling, or visiting a friend who is having a rough time; being present with one another pushes back the darkness and builds the strength of love to help us resist the evil that threatens to pervade. Being present with another helps us too; it draws us out of ourselves and back into community, and reminds of the good news of God's love for us.

The evil is out there- it is part of living in a broken world. At times it may feel like it is right at the door. But God is transforming and redeeming this broken world. God has not left us defenseless; he has equipped us to resist that evil as we trust in God's love for us and respond out of our experience of that love.