

Subject to Evil and Death
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One of the reasons I am an Episcopalian is my love of our Liturgy. Our Liturgy feeds me spiritually; I love the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer. Words in the Prayer Book have not changed since 1979. They are the same words that were there in 1986 when I was ordained a priest, the same words now in 2013. I would be lying if I did not say I get distracted saying familiar words that are so well known to me my mind can wander even while saying them. One of my favorite stories is from a seminarian friend whose father was a priest and whose priestly duties had called him out all night Saturday. He was at the hospital until Sunday morning when he left the hospital went straight to the church to do services. He was very tired and very distracted. When it came time to elevate the host, he lifted the host and said "Behold, the Handmaid of the Lord" without realizing his mistake.

The words of Eucharistic Prayer A are well known to all of us and after years of practice I can read them very fast. "Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of All" (BCP 362).

When I focus on the liturgy, I engaged the words of this prayer in my mind and I find them fascinating and oh, so true. "When we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death." It is easier to see in other people than it is in ourselves, that subjugation to evil. Some years ago, several members of my former congregation and I were trying to help a woman who had fallen on hard times. She was poor and uneducated. She was living with a man; she was always living with a man. The man that she was currently living with was better than the last one because he only beat her once

a week rather than the every other day beating she received before. One of our members was able to guide her through the bureaucratic nightmare of welfare and was able to get her a monthly check. She was uneducated and just could not hold a job. Her mental and emotional problems were such that she qualified for help from the state. The problem was: how to make sure she got the money rather than someone else. She lived in a trailer park where mail boxes were not very secure, and, of course the man that she was living with had access to the mailbox. I asked her: "Is there anyone, relative or friend, who could receive the check for you?" I asked, "Is there anyone, friend or relative, who can be trusted? Is there anyone who never stole from you?" The woman squinted up her face in thought; she thought and she thought and she thought. In the whole world, a place where she had lived for 35 years, this woman could not name a single person who had not stolen something from her.

"When we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death." It can be easier to see the slavery of sin in other people, especially if those people have a different lifestyle than ours. We expect to find sin in the ghetto or trailer park, not so much in the subdivision. We expect the poorly educated to make poor decisions that lead to slavery under sin. The bondage of the educated affluent, upwardly mobile is camouflaged by \$400 suits and \$80 shirts.

Years ago, before I was ordained, I worked for major auto manufacturer. I remember relaxing in the lounge at the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit enjoying the company of several of my co-workers after a long day of sales seminars and management meetings. We had been away from home for over a week; even with the posh surrounding in the Renaissance Center and the camaraderie that we were enjoying, home sickness was setting in.

The guy sitting next to me had his wallet out and he showing pictures of his wife and kids; it looked like a nice family. He was telling me about years of marriage and the joy of playing with his kids. While we were talking his wallet suddenly wallet snapped shut. "Did you see those honey's that just walk in the bar? I think the Red head looked right at me. I'm going over there and buy her a drink." With that his wallet with the pictures of his wife and kids, the wife he professed to love and the kids he adored, the wallet and the pictures went back in his pocket and my colleague went out on the prowl.

"When we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death." Lust weighed like shackles. Evil would jerk his chain and off he went, oblivious to the bondage of sin. This is not a slavery that kidnapped him, brought him to a foreign land, and sold him in a market. Into this slavery he sold himself, he fastened the chains, he tightened the ropes, and hidden under a very expensive suit he degraded himself in very upscale surroundings.

Out of his infinite love God made us for himself. God placed all of creation under our dominion. We are wonderfully made. The world is wonderfully made. At each step of creation God looked upon what he had made and declared it "Good." Then, as the pinnacle of creation he made human beings, male and female, and pronounced us "Very Good." We are created finite beings of infinite possibility with authority that comes from being made in the image and likeness of God. Then, of our own free will, in a moment of lust or greed or anger or jealousy or pride or envy, we handed over the authority to evil and became slaves to our own sinfulness. We may be rich and educated, we may be physically strong and in perfect health, we may be cunning and gifted. But nothing in our human condition can free us from this supernatural captivity. You do not outsmart the devil and it does no good to negotiate your release. What's the old saying?

"If you dance with the devil, the devil doesn't change you do."

The Gospel tell us, "The devil took Jesus up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, them, will worship me, it shall all be yours.' And Jesus answered him, 'It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" Jesus knew that there is nothing in the world, not glory, not authority, that can save the world. Salvation belongs to God, redemption through the Son of God. As the Apostle Paul teaches us, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

Episcopalians are truly blessed that we have the tradition of this beautiful Anglican liturgy to help us to call upon the Lord. Every one of us has fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death. The Gospel we proclaim is that the domain of sinfulness that has enslaved mankind is coming to an end. The sin that torments your life, you want to free yourself? Come to this altar receive, the Holy Communion, and call upon the name of the Lord. You cannot break the bonds of the sin you freely chose, but Jesus can. Jesus can forgive your sin, strengthen you in goodness by the Power of the Holy Spirit, and keep you in eternal life.

It is all here in today's worship service. You can leave here today a free man, a free woman, sent out into the world in peace. You can leave church today with a soul as pure as the breath of God. That would be good. And, if you weaken during the week and fall into sin, again, and become subject to evil and death, again, then by the grace of God will we start over, again, next week, right here at 8 am and 10:30 am. Amen.