

Overcome Evil With Good
Romans 12:9-21
September 3, 2017
First Presbyterian Church

9Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Sermon

As I mentioned in my Weekly ENote, in this twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul preaches his own version of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In the span of twelve short verses he cranks out a total of 30 instructions that are meant to guide the church in how to fulfill Jesus’ one commandment of LOVE.¹

He had good reason to go to so much trouble – the church in Rome was mired in conflict. There was conflict INSIDE the church between Jewish and Gentile Christians... and there was conflict with non-Christian Romans OUTSIDE the church. So it was pretty much a mess all around. People SAID they believed in the power of goodness... they SAID they believed in the power of love... until somebody crossed THEM... until somebody hurt them... and then the gloves came off. And we all know what that’s life – if you’ve ever been truly wronged... unfairly attacked... then you know how your mind works.

This is wrong, you tell yourself, and I’m in a lot of pain because of it. Somebody should pay for this... somebody should hurt as much as I am. Bad people have to be stopped... if not, they’ll just keep on hurting. We gotta fight fire with fire. God is a God of justice, after all!

That is how it usually works. Then the lawsuit is filed... the insult is returned... Joe Smith goes to one service because he can’t stand to be in the same room with Stan Brown who goes to the other. Sally Jones buys a pit bull to keep her pagan neighbor’s kids out of her yard. And so it goes... the cycle begins.... because something deep down inside of us says we have to fight fire with fire.

¹ Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon “Feeding the Enemy” published in *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Abingdon, 1998) p. 37-40.

The 1996 Olympics took place in my hometown of Atlanta... some of you may have gone.² My hunch is that even if you did you don't remember the names of athletes who made their mark during those games. Yet, you will remember the tragic incident involving a pipe bomb left in Centennial Park. That bomb killed one person and injured more than 100 others. Eric Rudolf then spent five years hiding in the Appalachian wilderness in far western N.C. until finally being captured in small town of Murphy in 2003. He is currently sits more than 22 hours a day in an 8x10 cell in a Supermax prison, serving more than four consecutive life terms for his role in the Olympic bombing as well as the bombings of women's health clinics and a bar frequented by gay and lesbian folk.

Well, at this sentencing hearing Eric Rudolf did apologize for what he had done... "I would do anything to take back that night", he said before two dozen victims and their families. And as you would expect, those victims and families had different reactions to this man and his words... there are TWO I want to tell you about.

The first was that of Fallon Stubbs. Ms. Stubbs was the 23 year old daughter of Alice Hawthorne, who was killed by the Olympic bomb... and she herself was wounded by shrapnel. Well, at his sentencing she offered Mr. Rudolf her forgiveness. "Because of you," she said, "I have become a tolerant person. Not for YOU, but for ME, I forgive you."

The other victim I want to call to your attention is Memrie Creswell... a 37 year woman whose right shoulder was pierced by a 4 inch nail from Eric Rudolf's bomb at the Otherside Lounge – a club frequented by gay men and lesbians. Ms. Creswell said to reporters after the sentencing: "He rolled his eyes when I said that I'm going to trump his evilness with love for the rest of my days." I'm going to trump his evilness with love for the rest of my days.

Now I don't know where Ms. Stubbs and Creswell got the grace and courage to do this. Maybe it was a gift of the Spirit and surprised even them – that's often how these gifts seem to show up. Or maybe each one of them had well-worn Bibles and were well-acquainted with the Sermon on the Mount and Romans 12... I don't know. Either way, what Fallon Stubbs and Memrie Creswell did was to put an end to the cycle of hate and meanness that was present in that courtroom. And that is precisely what I hear Paul encouraging the Romans to do as they try to live together with all their differences IN the church... and as they try to be faithful to Jesus OUTSIDE the church in a very hostile city of Rome... to STOP the cycle of hate and meanness.

Most of us have a strong, built-in sense of what's right and wrong... of what's fair and what's not... especially when WE feel wronged! So when we get the chance to execute a little justice of our own... we are sorely tempted to do so... to settle the score... I certainly am! So let me go ahead and say what most of us are thinking: that Paul's advice is incredibly idealistic... that it's terribly impractical... and that it MAY EVEN BE dangerous to one's health. Am I right? Still... there it is: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

² From Peter Marty's sermon on Day 1, "Trusting God to Settle Scores", August 28, 2011 (http://day1.org/3047-trusting_god_to_settle_scores)

Well, all I can figure is that Paul could write this because he had a deep understanding of two things: the power of evil... and the power of love. First, the power of evil – Paul seemed to understand (like Ms. Stubbs and Ms. Creswell did) that the one who insults your character or spreads a false rumor about you is NOT the ONLY enemy you face... that the husband or wife who was unfaithful... or the lifelong friend who embezzled from your company... or even the one who planted a pipe bomb in a public park... that one is NOT the ONLY enemy you face. They ARE enemies, yes! I think Paul would agree. But so is whatever it is inside of you that wants to leap up and strike back... so is whatever it is inside of us that wants to retaliate and get revenge.

You see, evil is never satisfied with controlling just ONE SIDE of a situation... the side that does the harming. No, evil's goal is to get hold of BOTH SIDES: the victim AND the bully... the offended along with the offender. Because when everyone has their dukes up... when there's a loaded gun on every person... when there's an endless cycle of hurt and retaliation... then, the enemy will have won... because the enemy will have successfully recruited all the "good guys" by making them think they are stopping all the "bad guys".

So Paul understood the insidious power evil... but even more he had an incredible faith in the power of love... a faith that love truly can conquer evil... a faith most of us do not understand... that most of us do not share... or at least are not eager to test. This is not how to do it! Paul says. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Because the moment you curse them, you join them... and no matter how good it may feel at the time, it is still a surrender. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it like this: "The only way to conquer evil is to absorb it. Take it into yourself and disarm it. Neutralize its acids. Serve as a charcoal filter for its smog. Suck it up, put a straightjacket on it and turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure."³

Let me assure you that neither Paul (nor I) think that any of this is easy. There is nothing sentimental or easy about any of this. And there is no guarantee that it will work. Abraham Lincoln said, "Do I not conquer my enemy by making him my friend?" Well, maybe sometimes... but there is no guarantee. What IS SURE is that when we repay evil with evil, evil is all there is... in bigger and more toxic piles. What IS SURE is that the only way to reverse this process is to behave in a totally unexpected way – like Ms. Stubbs and Ms. Creswell did – like our Lord Jesus did on the cross... by blessing the persecutor... embracing the bully... breaking the vicious cycle by just refusing to participate anymore.

That is what love is, Paul says... this is what real love is. Love is not a warm feeling among like-minded friends... love is imitating Jesus... who took all the meanness... all the injustice... all the unfairness all of the underserved suffering... and ran it through the filter of his own body ... repaying evil with good... blame with forgiveness... death with life. It worked once... the vicious cycle was broken... and it can work again whenever our Lord finds someone willing to give it a try... someone willing to trust him.

³ Taylor, p. 39.

Prayer

Lord, we pray this morning for the power to be gentle; the humility to be understanding; the courage to forgive; and the patience to accept the consequences of holding fast to what is good and noble. May we trust in the power we witness in Jesus on the cross – the power of good to overcome evil... of love to overcome hatred. We pray for the vision to see a world set free from the endless cycle of retaliation and revenge... and we pray for the faith to believe it will be. And so far as it depends on us, Lord, help us to live peaceably with all. May our love may be genuine, O Christ, for these our sisters and brothers in you... and for those we live with and work with and go to school with each day.

Charge

But what Paul knows is that this is precisely the time when it would be wise for us to step back and remember WHOSE version of justice we are executing... how subjective it is... how it is based on however we are feeling at that moment... and in that process to perhaps to loosen our grip on assuming that we know or understand perfect justice. Only God knows such things. And a bit more modesty on our part would go a long way toward recognizing God's perfect/far greater understanding of justice. And then... with that modesty and faith in God's perfect justice, we can journey through life more sensitively... walking more tenderly.

Have you ever heard someone say: "I have my scruples and I'm going to stand on them." They use that phrase when they're getting ready to stand up against someone. "Hey, I've got my scruple!" Most of us assume a "scruple" is like a "principle" – to be scrupulous, we reason, is to stand up for what is fair and honest and right. As in: "I am going to be fair... I'm going to do what is honest and right and nothing less."

But a scruple is really a sharp stone. I looked it up in the dictionary. The phrase "to stand on your scruples" comes from the idea of being bothered by a small sharp stone in your shoe. You know what that's like. That little bitty stone can be such a nuisance. And every time you step down you want to stop and take off your shoe and get rid of it.

“Standing on your scruples” means you stand there anyway. You stand there faithfully. You stand there firm. Because that little, irritating stone reminds us that there is only one who knows pure justice... so that we need to always stand with tender feet. Jesus teaches a kind of walk through life that involves tender feet... you can't read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and tromp through life thinking you are always right. And here in the 12th chapter of Romans, Paul lays out a whole set of scruples for those who would follow Jesus - little sharp stones in the shoes of Christian people that encourage us to walk with lots of sensitivity.⁴

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hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
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outdo one another in showing honor.

⁴ Marty again.

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Rejoice in hope,

be patient in suffering,

persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another;

do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;

do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

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