

Romans 12:14-21

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 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." 20 No, "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." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

A SERMON FOR A FRIGHTENED WORLD

I've been preaching for a long time. And one of the more interesting exercises for me each week is to dive into my file cabinets and see what I said about a passage when I preached on it several years ago.

Can you guess what was happening in the world when I last preached on this passage? It was Sunday, September 16, 2001, the week after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

I looked at the bulletin. The heading read "Worship For a Time of National Crisis." The liturgy and some of the hymns that we use this week are the same ones that I used that week ten years ago.

Do you remember what it was like? When people are afraid in a time of national crisis, they are looking for answers.

Many people came to church that day that normally didn't come. The TV and the newspapers all reported on the crowds of people who came to church and the special services that were held to try and make sense of this senseless attack. Some crowds that day were larger than the crowds on Easter Sunday.

The question we all faced that Sunday was this, "How do we confront evil?" Sometimes it is not possible to ignore or accommodate the evil that surrounds us. Sometimes a difficult situation requires us to respond in some way. People wanted answers.

Where is God when bad things happen? Why doesn't God intervene?

This is an important question for those who are agnostics or atheists. How can a good God who is all-powerful allow evil to exist?

Either God's power is limited (which doesn't seem very god like) or God is not entirely good. So, the unbeliever chooses to believe that there is no God or if there is a God, this God is not interested in what happens to us.

EVIL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

God's people have struggled with the problem of evil from the very beginning. In the Old Testament God's people were often defeated by their enemies. How could they understand the evil that had invaded their lives?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God's people express anger and frustration in the face of those defeats. Those Scriptures often call upon God to intervene on their behalf, to destroy those who have treated them so cruelly.

But, most of the time God's people were not strong militarily. They were in no position to do anything about the destruction that had visited their land.

Often their bitterness turned to despair. Many even lost their faith in God altogether.

But, some hoped for a day when God would help his people take vengeance on their enemies. They talked about a Messiah, a man who would be in the mold of King David, a man who would be chosen by God to lead the revolution and establish God's kingdom on earth.

Unfortunately, no one seemed up to the task. Many tried to put on the mantle of messianic leadership, but they all found the robe too heavy to wear. Without real military might the Jews often found themselves on the losing side, and their military heroes were often vanquished.

But, despite overwhelming defeat and despair, amazingly there were always some who kept the faith. They said,

“One day, when the Messiah comes things will be different.”

A DIFFERENT KIND OF MESSIAH

Many years passed. The days of the prophets and the mighty acts of God faded into the mist of time. Some religious and political leaders decided to make peace with the powers that be. Instead of fighting the Romans they settled with them. It was an uneasy and unsatisfactory truce, but it kept the nation from ruin at the hands of yet another occupying army.

And into this unsettled land there was born a man named Jesus. Unlike the religious leaders who made accommodations with the world Jesus was different. He spoke as one who had authority. He said what only God could say. He did what only God could do. People once again heard the prophetic word and experienced the mighty power of God.

And the people quite naturally thought that Jesus was the Messiah. The crowds wanted to make him king. The disciples wanted to be on his right and left in a glorious crusade for national independence.

But, Jesus was not the Messiah that the people wanted. When Jesus talked about his kingdom, he made it plain that it would not be a kingdom where enemies would be destroyed by horse and chariot. It would be a kingdom where enemies would be loved and curses would be met with blessings.

This was not what the people wanted to hear. In his hometown they tried to throw him off a cliff for talking so favorably about enemies. Many abandoned him because his way was just too hard.

Even his closest disciples had no idea what he meant. A Messiah without military power seemed unrealistic. Finally, these confused, discouraged and fearful disciples ran away in the face of the cross.

And so Jesus was left to face the evil alone. The powers that be mocked him. They challenged him to demonstrate his power. But, all he would say the Roman governor was that his kingdom was not of this world.

In the end Jesus just seemed to be one hopelessly unrealistic dreamer standing against the power of mighty Rome. But, even a crackpot can be dangerous. So Pilate gave in to the crowds who called for his execution.

What do you do with a Messiah that doesn't fit the Messiah mold? You kill him. As the religious leaders put it, "It's better for one man to die than for a whole country to be messed up."

So, they crucified Jesus. Ironically the greatest threat to a world built on military threat and coercion was a man who taught and lived a word of peace and forgiveness.

FATHER FORGIVE THEM

And in the middle of a torturous death Jesus turned toward his enemies and said, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

And a Roman centurion, an enemy who was responsible for carrying out his death was changed by how Jesus died. Looking to the one who hung on the cross he said, "Surely, this man was the Son of God!"

On that day the world changed forever. Good overcame evil. Life overcame death.

The cross, a symbol of the worst that men and women can do was transformed by the resurrection into a symbol of the best that God can do.

No one saw it coming. It was not what anyone expected. And it is still a message of hope that challenges a world filled with evil and fear.

The world still mocks and doubts the message. The world asks derisively, “How can you be so unrealistic? If God is so good, why is evil allowed to flourish?”

And some who claim to be disciples of Jesus still run away from the message. Fearful disciples still look for a different kind of Savior, not one who saves them through a cross but one who saves them from a cross.

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see the face of God. And this God looks quite different from the God we often imagine.

This God does not deliver us from our humanity. This God joins us in our humanity.

This God does not deliver us from suffering. This God joins us in our suffering.

This God does not repay evil with evil. This God overcomes evil with good.

THE HARD MESSAGE OF THE CROSS

If we truly believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him, then we must take seriously the call of Jesus to take up a cross and follow him.

If we truly believe that Jesus is way, the truth and the life, then loving enemies and blessing those who persecute us must be more than a nice sentiment. It must somehow become a reality in the community of faith.

Christians would undergo tremendous persecution in Rome. Many would be martyred for the faith. And what does Paul tell those who will face such intense persecution?

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. That is a hard message.

But it is not a new message. This is a message taken directly from Jesus.

And yet when I teach a Bible study on this people often struggle with this message. They want to make it say something else, and I sometimes like to say half jokingly,

“Hey folks. Don’t blame me. I didn’t write this stuff!”

And to be honest I struggle with this message too. Do I bless those who persecute me? I don’t even bless those who cut me off on the interstate ... much less those who persecute me.

In fact I’m not sure I’ve ever been persecuted.

But, if I were persecuted, rest assured that pronouncing a blessing on my persecutor would not be my first choice!

So, how can I preach about loving enemies, blessing those who persecute, and taking up a cross and following Jesus?

I preach about it not because it is what I am inclined to do or am even able to do on my own.

I preach about it because it is the truth about what God does in Jesus Christ.

I preach about it because I believe that the power of God is displayed in this radical forgiveness.

IS THE MESSAGE UNREALISTIC?

People continue to tell me that this radical forgiveness is unrealistic, but how well does the alternative work? Is meeting evil with evil a practical strategy?

It's been my experience that when we demonize our enemies and seek retribution; we often end up making things much worse. We begin a cycle of violence and recrimination that seems to have no end.

When Jesus blessed his enemies and forgave them even as they crucified him, Jesus threw a monkey wrench into the world's violent cycle. He was right. His kingdom was not of this world, and he refused to play by the world's rules.

And it was this refusal to play by the world's rules that brought change and forgiveness. He truly did overcome evil with good. We say it each week. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. The blood of Christ saves us from our sins. How does that work?

It is not some esoteric doctrine of salvation. It is hearing Christ say from the cross to me, "Father, forgive Frank. He has no clue."

Salvation begins when we can imagine ourselves as sinners without hope save for the grace of God. And until we can imagine that in a practical way, it will be difficult to hear the words of salvation.

PRACTICAL FORGIVENESS

Paul gives the Romans a practical way to get at this doctrine of forgiveness. He tells them to practice it in the community of faith.

He tells them not to act like they know everything. He tells them to try and understand the joys and sorrows of fellow Christians, to rejoice with them when they rejoice and to weep with them when they weep.

Sometimes when we walk a mile in another person's shoes, we can be less critical and less judgmental.

Paul also says that if your enemy is hungry give him something to eat. If your enemy is thirsty give him something to drink.

This is an effective response because when we respond to evil with good, people are forced to re-evaluate their view of things. It really is as if we have poured hot coals on their heads.

The centurion said that Jesus was the Son of God as he heard his words of forgiveness from the cross. In the same way Christians in this day and time who dare to practice the radical love and forgiveness of Christ can also convert enemies into believers by the power of grace.

When we talk about passages like this we often use big examples of forgiveness. We talk about Martin Luther King or Mother Theresa or some other mythical symbol of piety. We say things like,

“Well they might be able to do it and Jesus may be able to do it but not me. I just have trouble even imagining forgiving someone who is really an enemy.”

And when we discuss forgiveness we also tend to talk about the worst enemy imaginable. We say, “Who could forgive Hitler or Osama Bin Laden or Muammar Gaddafi?” And by shifting the discussion to the ultimate forgiveness of the ultimate sinner, we really do make the Christian faith seem unrealistic.

Yes, I’m not Jesus. I probably wouldn’t be able to forgive many things.

But, notice that in a way Paul doesn’t challenge the Romans to do something really big. He challenges them to do something really small.

He asks them to imagine breaking the cycle of violence by just showing a little compassion toward an enemy, giving them something to eat or a cup of water. Paul asks them to just give a blessing, a kind word instead of a harsh word toward the one who persecutes them.

I don’t know about you, but I can imagine that. I can imagine saying something good to a difficult person. I can imagine trying to understand or help someone in a small way even though they might be an enemy.

LIGHT A CANDLE IN THE DARKNESS

And I can imagine that even small acts of forgiveness and kindness might change things.

How many big arguments with friends or family have been started with relatively minor disagreements? I would contend that the opposite is also true. Relatively minor acts of forgiveness and compassion can lead to bigger positive changes. Paul tells the Romans that a little bit of forgiveness can go a long way.

Paul wrote, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

In other words don’t spend your time worrying about those acts of violence and war that are beyond your control. Worry about those things that depend upon you. What can you do today to promote the peace of Christ?

Don’t concentrate on the impossible. Concentrate on the possible. To paraphrase a famous motto, instead of cursing the darkness, light one small candle.

We might not be able to do everything, but we can do something. Instead of adding to the evil and discord in the world we can add to the good. We can speak a word of forgiveness, and that word in God’s hands can change more than we could ever imagine.

And when it comes to the big evil in the world, those ruthless dictators and criminals who are out to destroy society don’t waste your emotional energy hating those people.

Again, it’s very practical advice.

We have no control over the big events of life. But, we can control our reactions to those events. We can recognize that in the end it is God who will judge. And that recognition can give us a great deal of comfort and peace in a time of upheaval.

LEAVE VENGEANCE TO GOD

Paul wrote, “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.’”

Evil is compounded and magnified when we try to play God. When we make judgments that are not ours to make we do more harm than good is done. When Jesus was taken by his enemies, one of the disciples sought to defend Jesus with the sword.

And Jesus told that disciple, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

In other words violence often creates more problems than it solves. Those who help the victims of violent crime talk about how it is necessary to get beyond the desire for vengeance because in the end the desire for vengeance does not really harm the one who has committed the crime. The desire for vengeance does further damage to the victim of the crime.

God tells us to leave the vengeance to Him.

This is an act of mercy, but it is not an act of mercy toward those who have committed evil acts. It is an act of mercy toward those who are victims. If we can leave the vengeance to God we will not be re-victimized by our own anger and a burning desire to “get back” at those who have harmed us.

Quite often people who have been victimized by evil see the rest of their life go downhill. They may get a divorce or lose a job. They may lose friendships that had been strong from many years.

Why? Misplaced anger creeps into their other relationships.

OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD

The most effective way to deal with evil according to Paul is to overcome evil with good. Quite often that “good” takes the form of doing something positive to help those who have been harmed in the way you have been harmed.

Have you been mistreated by your parents? Make sure you treat your own children in a different way. Have you been harmed by a criminal? Volunteer to help others who have been victimized by crime and so forth.

This past week I watched a special on that new building being constructed on the site of the World Trade Center. It is quite a remarkable building.

But, the thing that makes it so exciting to me is that it represents the antithesis of the evil that was perpetuated. According to the architect the gigantic glass panels represent the determination of our society to be open and free. The building is a statement that we will not be deterred by the evil of terrorism.

The workers see this tremendous task as more than a job but as an opportunity to do something good for a community that has been harmed and traumatized. Instead of focusing on the evil that was perpetuated we rebuild out of hope. I think that in some ways this rebuilding is an example of overcoming evil with good.

But, of course there is always more work to do. Wars continue to be fought. Some suggest that the nation is more divided now than it has been in a long time.

And in the church that dissatisfaction is reflected. We are also divided over many social and political issues. We are divided over what we believe and what we are called by God to do. Many are frustrated and some even feel persecuted.

The words of Paul are apropos for a time such as this. Live in harmony with each other, and overcome evil with good.

Some folks have the mistaken impression that true Christians will always agree and get along. The early church was filled with disputes over beliefs, morality and mission. But, despite the difficulty the grace of God as revealed in Jesus prevailed.

The Roman government that sought to destroy Christianity is no longer around. But, the message of God’s grace and forgiveness is still around.

That grace and forgiveness still challenges and encourages all of us to think of a different way to respond to evil, to overcome evil with good, to overcome evil with God.

Amen.