

“A New Way of Living“

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Romans 12:9-21

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14 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.

OVERCOMING EVIL

Last week’s sermon was entitled “A New Way of Thinking”.

This week’s sermon is entitled “A New Way of Living”.

Last week we saw that God’s grace should lead to gracious living.

This week we ask: So what does gracious living look like?

More specifically, we want to know:

What does gracious living look like in the face of evil?

Can you guess what was in the news the last time I wrote a sermon on this passage?

911. In the middle of all that turmoil and fear and overwhelming anger ... I wanted to find a passage from Scripture that would give us some guidance.

How could we confront this threat?
How could we confront what was truly evil?

Today's Scripture lesson seemed to fit that need.
It is bracketed by this thought:
We overcome evil by holding fast to what is good.

There's a commercial on TV that quotes Nelson Mandela. He said,

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

I must admit that sometimes I wonder if love really does come more naturally than hate to the human heart. I see plenty of evidence to the contrary.

But, one thing I do know.

Love is at the heart of the Christian faith.
And I believe love is more powerful than hate ... not because of who we are ...
But, because of who God is.

God is love.
And in the love of God there is no darkness.

GENUINE LOVE

So, as you might expect, gracious living begins and ends with love.
This love encourages us and lifts us up in our time of need.

We do not learn about love in a textbook.
We learn about love by putting it into practice.

Our lesson for today states,
"Let love be genuine ..."
I agree with John Lennon. "All you need is love".
But love needs to be carefully defined ... especially in this day and time when love tends to be virtual instead of real.

I heard someone say recently,
“Oh, they’re not friend friends.
They’re Facebook friends.”

There’s no such thing as Facebook friends when we talk about the biblical concept of what is good and what it means to love.

Real friendship requires a real relationship.

It is face to face.
It is practical.
It is down to earth.

It is a love that you see and hear and touch.

Most of you know that “agape” is one of the Greek words used for love. It’s used in our passage for today when Paul says “let your love (agape) be genuine”.

To put it another way,
“Agape cannot be sloppy!”

Real love is not virtual.
Real love is not an act.
Real love is genuine.

And, most importantly, Christian love mirrors the steadfast love of God ...

Sincere.
No strings attached.

The power of the gospel can only be experienced when we put love into action.

You can read the Bible all you want,
but if you never put the selfless love taught in the Bible into action
... it won’t do you a bit of good.

Have you ever noticed that when someone models that kind of selfless love, we want to be like them. Like the old campfire song I referred to last week. When we experience God’s love we want to pass it on.

And we experience God's love through the ministry of God's loving people.
There's no other way.

Genuine love, God's love changes the character of our life together.

It's how God works in the church.
It's how God works in the world.

This past week Texas has suffered a terrible disaster.
But, what made things a bit more bearable?
What inspired us?

People helping each other out of love.
Neighbors risking their own life to retrieve others from the flood.

This kind of love inspires us.
This kind of love gives us hope.
This kind of love encourages us to do something as well.

But, more than that,
when we see acts of selfless love,
we see God at work in the middle of the storm.

CROSS SHAPED LOVE

This is the nature of God's love.
It is genuine. It is personal.
It is willing to sacrifice and take risks.

This is how God first loved us.
And this kind of sacrificial love forms the foundation of the Christian faith.
This is the kind of love that we see on the cross.

But, this love in the shape of a cross also brings home another reality.
Evil.
The cross is a symbol of salvation, but it is also a symbol of evil.

Christian love requires us to take a stand.
It requires us to reject evil.

Love builds up the church,
but love also empowers us to confront what is wrong in the world.

In the very same sentence Paul also says, “Hate what is evil ...”
We could also translate this, “Be horrified by evil ...”

MORAL OUTRAGE

None of us want to go over to the dark side.
But, sometimes we become numb to what is right and what is wrong.
Little by little we make compromises in our life that lead us away from
God’s truth.

We say nothing when we should speak out.

Paul is telling us to cultivate a sense of moral outrage, and that outrage be-
gins at home.
We hate the evil in our own life, and honestly admit our own sinfulness.

We’ve talked about the fact this was true for Paul.
He freely admitted that he was not true to what he thought was right.

What he should do he neglected.
And the things that he shouldn’t do?
You guessed it ... those were the very things that he found himself doing.

Confession is truly good for the soul.
And it was honest confession of sin that allowed Paul to experience God’s
grace.

FIGHTING EVIL WITH GOOD

But, in this passage Paul tells us that confession alone is not enough.

We not only learn to recognize and abhor evil in our own lives and in the
world;

we also learn to “hold fast to what is good.”

We fight evil with good.

Evil loves a vacuum.
If we do not hold fast to what is good,
evil invariably comes back into our life with a vengeance.

It's sort of like your kitchen cabinet.

Have you ever cleared out a space in your kitchen cabinet?

I have.
Do you know what happens?

Ten things fill up that space by nightfall.
It looked more cluttered than when I began!

The same thing is true in our lives.

Emptying the bad things out of our life is not enough.
We must learn to fill our lives not only with a sense of what is wrong but
also with a sense of what is right.

If we don't we will find that evil will quickly fill the void that we have created
by trying to "clean house".

CHRIST SHAPED LOVE

So how do we know what is right?
What's the measuring stick for what is good?

In our passage for today, Paul suggests some ideas that are based upon
the life of Christ.

First of all, we love one another just as God in Christ has loved us.
In a world that encourages hate and violence we encourage service and
forgiveness.

When there's a financial need, we contribute.
When a stranger does not have a place to stay, we take him in.

We rejoice with those who rejoice.
We weep with those who weep.

We show compassion to those who are lost in life.
We stand up for justice and righteousness.

And when we are persecuted ...
(and make no mistake we will be ... those who confront evil are always persecuted)
... we respond with patience and prayer.

That's the hard part for me.
I'm not very good with the "patient prayer" part of this passage.

When I confront evil, I want to respond with force.
I want to fight fire with fire.

But what happens when we do that?
What happens when we meet hateful speech and threats with more hateful speech and threats?
It ratchets up the tension and the cycle of violence is perpetuated.

NONVIOLENCE

Love refuses to challenge evil on its own terms.
This is an important aspect of the Christian faith.

Nikita Khrushchev, the former leader of the Soviet Union and an avowed atheist understood this clearly. He once said,

"The difference between Christianity and Communism is great.
When someone strikes you on the face, you turn the other cheek.
If you strike me on the face, I'll hit you so hard your head will fall off."

Sadly sometimes Christians do not understand the Christian faith as well as this former Communist leader. We talk about "righteous indignation" and just war. Sometimes the vigilante spirit is alive and well in the church.

But, we should not glorify our worst instincts.
War is hell. And retaliation is jumping off a cliff that leads to mutually assured destruction.
(We abbreviate that "MAD" by the way ... an appropriate abbreviation if there ever was one.)

This passage, like so many passages in the Bible make it crystal clear.

Paul wrote, “Do not repay evil for evil ...” Why?
Because we want to take into consideration what is “noble” in the sight of all.

In a conflict we don’t act impulsively.
Instead we think about what will bring about the greater good in the long run.

Christians do not believe that the ends justify the means.
We believe that the means will determine where we end up.

If we choose darkness, if we choose evil, if we choose hate as an answer,
that is where we will end up in the long run.

Martin Luther King put it this way,

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate;
only love can do that.”

Using threats and guilt are ineffective ways to achieve peace.
(Although heaven knows we still try.)
No one has ever been saved by threats and guilt.
Those things only make a bad situation worse.

This is not only a wrong way to confront evil;
it plays right into the hands of those who would perpetuate violence.

Some of the Neo-Nazis were interviewed after the confrontation in Charlottesville.

And they freely admitted that this was what they wanted.

Confrontation gave them publicity.
In their eyes, Charlottesville advanced their cause.

And ... to be fair, there are groups on the left who are advocating violence as well.

Someone once said that the political world is round and that Communists and Fascists often meet in the same violent place.

Christians insist on avoiding those extremes.

We love our enemies

... not by accepting the evil they perpetuate

... but by standing up for justice in a nonviolent way.

I wonder.

What would happen if we put this radical love into action?

What would happen if we didn't repay evil with evil?

What would it look like?

How can we confront evil without becoming what we hate?

CONFRONTING EVIL IN A NONVIOLENT WAY

We've all heard about what happened at Charlottesville and the terrible violence that occurred when a Neo-Nazi group marched through town.

But, in Germany there was another Neo-Nazi march in a small town that received very little notice. Their response to the march was quite different from the response in Charlottesville.

A group of organizers gathered pledges.

For every meter the Neo-Nazis walked, money would be raised to support an anti-hate group.

The people of the small town put up signs all along the parade route thanking the Nazis for raising so much money to fight hate.

The organizers even set up tables that contained water and bananas to thank the marchers for their help with this worthy cause.

(That action seemed to echo what Paul said in our passage, "... 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.")

By the way you can actually see what this march looked like.
There's a video on the internet ... of course.

The shops and homes are closed.
No one interacts with the marchers.
They just watch from their windows.

The Neo-Nazis actually look confused and a bit dazed by all this.
They solemnly carry a cross through town with one of the old German
storm trooper helmets on it.

But, it doesn't seem to have the desired effect.

Maybe this little town (probably without knowing it) has given us a modern
example of what Paul is talking about in our lesson for today.

There are those who tell us that the only way to overcome evil is to meet
fire with fire.

If we do that, we too will be overcome by evil.

We will become a part of a cycle of hate and distrust that never ends.

Paul suggests that the only way to overcome evil is it with good.

We may restrain evil for a season with force.

But, long term change can only come from a new way of thinking and a
new way of living.

Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians spoke of this "more excellent way".
He described it in great detail in the 13th chapter of that letter.

The more excellent way is the way of love.

We cannot condone evil nor can we fail to speak against it.

Instead we choose to fight evil with the strongest power at our disposal ...
the power of love.

Martin Luther King devoted his life to nonviolent change in even the most
difficult circumstances. He won a lot of us over with what he said and more
importantly what he did.

But, he also suffered much before he was killed. And he was criticized by many who wanted him take more aggressive, violent actions against injustice.

In response he said,
"I have decided to stick with love.
Hate is too great a burden to bear."

We all confront evil every day.
It's a fact of life.

We may get angry.
We may try to get even.
We may try to place blame and shame.

But, that's a heavy burden to bear.

On the cross Jesus showed us the way.
It's the way of forgiveness.

It's not easy.
And yet it sure beats the heavy burden that hate brings to our life.

When we take communion today, it's all about laying down the heavy burden of hate.
The cross becomes a sign of salvation instead of destruction.
And the body broken and the blood shed become a means of grace.

Each month we take the bread and the cup because we need to remember what it all meant.
As Paul put it,
"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Amen.