

FCCS August 25, 2020

Rev. Curran Reichert

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 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." 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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We are sticking with the Apostle Paul this week. Today's admonition to the faithful builds on the passage from last week that instructed believers to strive for constant connectedness to the Almighty. We were reminded that each of us has specific gifts for participating in the body of Christ and that we are called to use those gifts to bring about God's realm on earth.

While last week's passage was instructional in nature, some of today's words read more like a to do list, or a series of sappy sentiments found in the Christian greeting card section at the Rite Aid.

- Hold fast to what is good.
- Love one another with mutual affection
- Live in harmony

It's Golden Rule stuff, the price we expect to pay for being a decent human being. And while it serves its purpose as everyday theology, the likelihood that it will transform anyone or anything is slim to none.

The transformative bits in Paul's letter to the early church are found in the lines we prefer to ignore. The ones that, if taken seriously, would change a whole lot of things:

- Associate with the lowly
- Do not claim to be wiser than you are
- Leave room for God

Truth teller and novelist Anne Lamott, lays it out like so;

“Half an hour ago, I got to see what a snarky jerk I can be. I did something hurtful to a friendly and innocent person. In my defense, I felt like I was just hanging on yesterday, after witnessing the brutality of last week, the devastation of (the) last (five) months, the fever dream of the last four years. I had been in tears, I had been sick with fear, I had been blindsided by a sheetmetal sense of isolation. I was a mess. That’s my excuse and I am sticking to it.

Except that this is not good enough, if transformation is going to come out of all that we have been going through. This will include both the deep dive into miserable truths, and radical self-forgiveness. Neither is my strong suit.”

Lamott and the Apostle Paul are of one mind here- radical transformation, the kind that Jesus called for, and the kind that will save our skin now, is only going to happen by digging deep into the “miserable truths” we find at our own doorsteps.

If, like me, you wanted to shriek at the top of your lungs when you heard the bi-line of the National Republican Convention this week, Paul says:

- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

We may want to turn a blind eye on these words today, assuming that Paul couldn’t possibly have meant what he said to apply to our context?

But get this, Paul’s reality was very much like ours. Like Jesus, Paul lived in a time of tremendous civic unrest, the Roman oligarchy (from Greek ὀλιγαρχία (oligarkhía)); formed a governance in which all the power rested within a small number of people. Roman Oligarchs believed they ought to be deified, much the same as our current president believes he is the one to make America great again, again.

Still these are the bricks and mortar of our faith;

- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

That is gonna take some soul force my friends, some deep spiritual work.

But what are we to say to the parents of their now paralyzed 29-year-old son, Jacob Blake, who was shot in the back seven times by police in front of his three children? Paul says,

- Beloved, never avenge yourselves for vengeance belongs to God alone.

In our country *we say leave it to the justice system*, yet we have watched countless occasions in which our system of justice fails to act justly when black and brown bodies are senselessly maimed or murdered by officers of the law.

Paul says live in harmony;

But there can be no peace without justice, no harmony until all people can agree on certain baselines for human dignity, economic and environmental well-being.

I feel like we have turned the other cheek long enough and where has it gotten us? We are tired, weary of it all, running out of ways to look on the bright side.

In her new book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson. Tells the story of "the man in the crowd," August Landmesser of Hamburg, Germany, who stood--bravely still--in the midst of his countrymen, who were all raising their arms in salute to Hitler. The famous photograph is a stark illustration of quiet, dangerous, stubborn courage in the face of evil. (The rest his story is consistent with his witness.)

As only an artist can do, Wilkerson offers an illustration of one man who would not be overcome by evil, but who would overcome evil with good and then the author asks, "What would it take to be him now?"

That my friend is the question of the table? "What would it take to be him now?"

We're gonna have to dig deep, a lot of prayer, a lot of volunteer hours, gonna have to dig deep. A lot of letters, lot of phone calls and protests. We're gonna have to vote, encourage others to vote and defend the rights of everyone in this country to receive a mail in ballot. It starts and ends with us.

In Tuesday's e-mail you will receive a suggestion for a voting ritual to help to drawing a sacred circle around this right that so many, have fought so hard for all of us all to have. Please watch for that.

Finally, beloved, hear these words again:

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine;

hold fast to what is good;

Love one another with mutual affection;

Be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

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

Indeed "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

Amen