

Marks of the True Christian

Rom. 12:9 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.^a ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Rom. 12:14 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;^a 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;^a 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.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

Matt. 16:21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

The Cross and Self-Denial

Matt. 16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake

will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Matt. 16:27 “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Victory is ours, Victory is ours through God who loves us...

Grace, Mercy, and the Peace of Christ that surpasses our ability to do great harm to one another be with us as we consider these words from our scriptures. Friends, I first preached on these texts three years ago at Eastside Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls. In that sermon I utilized the hymn in our Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal, number 721 “Goodness is Stronger than Evil” as a reference. The text for this hymn is by Archbishop Desmond Tutu who I first heard as a speaker at the ELCA youth gathering in 2000 in St. Louis, many years before I would join an ELCA congregation and eventually go to seminary and become a pastor... I am, if nothing else, a slow learner.

John Bell. The composer of the melody for “Goodness is Stronger than Evil” is also the lyricist behind hymn number 798 “Will You Come and Follow Me” which we will sing together at Grace Lutheran Church in Parker next Sunday. John Bell is one of the composers to come out of the Iona Community. A thing that captivates me in much of the music from this community is the swing and sway of the rhythms. And I think there’s something of a swing and a sway to what both Jesus and Paul are talking about in our readings. It’s kind of like the martial art known as Aikido which attempts to protect ones attacker from injury and to overcome oneself. I’ll come back to this theme of a communal rhythm but first I want to tell you about an aspect of my work as our synod’s Director for Rural Ministries.

I have the great pleasure of leading a weekly scripture text study on Zoom with our Synod Authorized Ministers. It’s something I look forward to each

week. And this summer I've been pulling out a quote or two each week from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that connects to our readings from Romans and Matthew.

One of this weeks quotes comes from a sermon he preached in 1938, five years into Nazi rule in Germany, Bonhoeffer preached:

“Christ demands a difficult sacrifice from us, namely, to let go of our revenge, perhaps the most difficult, for all of human nature screams for revenge against enemies. The lust for revenge is stronger in our human blood than any other addiction. But this we know: we cannot take revenge anymore. If the enemy stands before my eyes and the craving for revenge overcomes me, at once Jesus Christ stands behind my enemy and bids me: do not lift your hand, vengeance is mine, I will take it.”

There's one thing I want to point out from the Matthew reading that I think is important to speak clearly and briefly on. When Jesus says that the path of being a disciple is denying oneself and taking up a cross, he's not suggesting to anyone then or now that we stay in an abusive situation. Neither giving nor taking nor receiving punches for Jesus (in whatever form these may come) is part of what God desires. And America's militant cult of churchianity, that dresses up its punches as self-sacrifice, is really nothing but a gaudy self-righteousness designed to replace the cross of Christ with a crown of glory.

It's important that we do the continual and communal work of gauging the difference between an abusive situation and choosing to stand in solidarity with Christ and our neighbors in a community that “holds fast to what is good”. As Desmond Tutu wrote in *The Book of Forgiving*, “Transformation is always possible. We do not heal in isolation. When we reach out and connect with one another – when we tell the story, name the hurt, grant forgiveness, and renew or release the relationship – our suffering begins to transform.” And this is really the heart of what Paul is getting at.

Now let's look again at today's reading from Romans 12. I want you to hear it from the First Nations Version which will give us some real insight into what Paul might be getting at beginning in verse 14

"14 Bless the ones who seek to harm you. Bless and do not curse! 15 Dance with the ones who dance for joy, and shed tears with the ones whose hearts have fallen to the ground. 16 Seek to live in harmony with all. Do not think you are better than others. Walk the road of life with the humble of heart, and do not be wise in your own eyes. 17 No one should pay back evil with evil. Do what you know to be honorable in the eyes of another. 18 If it is within your power, walk the road of peace with everyone. 19 My much-loved family members, do not take the punishment of others into your own hands. Instead, turn all anger and wrath over to the Great Spirit. For the Sacred Teachings tell us, 'Punishment for wrongs belongs to me,' says the Great Spirit Chief. 'I will make sure that wrongs are made right again.' 20 You should do the opposite. 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If your enemy thirsts, give him a drink. Your kindness will be like burning coals poured on his head, as his shame for the way he has treated you bursts into flame.' 21 Do not let evil take over in your heart, but overcome evil with good."

To me, this interpretation really gets to the heart of what Paul is trying to communicate. He's encouraging his readers to "never let your spiritual fire go out" by staying in community. And part of that spiritual fire is to repay evil with good and to make this exchange repeatedly as a community. It is repeated kindness done as a community of faith in the face of hatred that Paul is suggesting will ultimately be like burning coals on the consciousnesses of those who are knowingly or unknowingly trapped in sinful negative feedback loops of their own destruction.

The goal Paul is seeking after is not piling on to the suffering of those who are enacting evil and calling it good. No, Paul is actually quoting a Proverb. Chapter 25 verses 21 and 22 in Proverbs states, "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will

reward you.” And burning coals in the Hebrew scriptures are often utilized as metaphors, these coals are intended to rekindle the flame of love in the cold systems of hate which have come to dominate the culture. And Paul, who persecuted the Church knew this experience first hand...;

Here again the words of Desmond Tutu ring true, “In our own ways, we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again.” But “Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering – remembering and not using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don't want to repeat what happened.”

Friends, we do not want to repeat where we've been, lost and left for dead. We know now that all of this world including us have been trapped in a cold-hearted feedback loop that labels siblings as strangers and hates what God loves. And just to be clear God loves all that God has made, that includes you and me. Here's how Dietrich Bonhoeffer concluded his sermon all those years ago:

“This is what Christ did for us. He did not become confused by our evil; he did not let himself be overcome by it. He overcame our evil with good. Let's repeat how [that] happens: not by feeding the other person's evil with our evil, the hatred of the other person with our hatred. Rather, it happens when the evil hits emptiness and finds nothing on which it can ignite. How do we overcome evil? ...By seeing the enemy as the one he truly is, the one for whom Christ died, the one whom Christ loved. How will the church—community win victory over its enemies? By letting the love of Christ win victory over the enemies.”

Thanks be to God we have a different rhythm to step to in Jesus who takes the lead when we like Peter become confused by our own vanities in defending God. God does not need our defense, but our neighbors (both

friends and enemies) certainly do. Thanks be to God we have one who shows the way by rekindling our communal flame so that we too might die to sin and rise to new life. The swing and the sway of this life is leaning into Christ and one another. This is how Christ breaks the cold pattern of this world. And if we need a timely reminder, go find a good Scottish melody, maybe one from the Iona Community to sing along to.

Victory is ours, Victory is ours through God who loves us... Amen.