

September 3, 2017
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Do Not Be Overcome

There is a lot of anger out there in the world today. In Charlottesville and Boston and San Francisco and Seattle. There are protests and counter-protests and demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. And to say there is a lot of anger seems like a great big understatement. If my Facebook feed is any indication, everyone is angry. Many people I talk to in person are frustrated about what needs to be said, and what they need to say and what I need to say and what we all need to say in this time and in these circumstances. And I have to admit that I'm not exactly sure what to say. When there is so much anger out there, what do I say as a follower of Christ? What should I do? How am I supposed to live and act and speak in a world that is so angry and divided?

Today's scripture readings come to us at a good time, as we think about these questions. The Bible is good like that. It's good at helping us think and not just react. Because human beings tend to react without thinking. But God gave us a brain for a reason. And this community of faith for a reason. And this book for a reason. So that we can think about how God

wants us to live in this world. And this book is full of stories about people who have been in situations like this one. We are not the first ones to have to negotiate an angry world. We are not the first ones challenged to use our reason instead of our rage. We are not the first. The very first one was Cain, the first child of Adam and Eve, who let anger get the best of him and then he murdered his brother, Abel. And that is definitely not how God would like creation to go. It's not what God wants for us or for the world. So we slow down and we think together. As the apostle Paul says, so that we will not be overcome by evil.

That's what Paul is telling the church at Rome today. He is telling them how to be the church, and what to do as disciples of Jesus and what not to do as disciples of Jesus. Paul is giving the church his final instructions in his letter. Here's what they are to do: they should love each other sincerely and hold fast to what is good and compete to do what is most honorable. And rejoice, and be patient, and persevere. And then Paul tells the church what NOT to do. Do not lag in commitment, he says. Do not be arrogant. Do not think you are wiser than you are. Do not curse

others. Do not to repay evil with evil. Do not avenge yourself. Do not be overcome by evil.

Do not. Do not. Do not. The number of DO NOT instructions in this passage is remarkable. And I don't think it's because the church at Rome was particularly bad and needed to be reminded of these things. It's because everyone particularly in every church needs to hear these things. Human beings, in particular, need to be reminded that anger and rage and self-justification should not be what makes us 'us'. Yes, we feel these feelings. Yes, we are angry and frustrated by very real things. Yes, we are hurt and we want to hurt back. But when those feelings consume us and become us, and we are overcome with a need for vengeance, then we are overcome. And the image of Christ in us is overcome. And the work of God's goodness in us is overcome.

Do not be overcome by evil, says Paul. Do not be overcome by the hatred and anger that seeks to pull creation apart. Do NOT lose who you are in Christ and who you are meant to be, Do not be overcome. In his letter, Paul suggests that that means two things for us. First, Do NOT try to be more than you are. Do NOT try to be God, Paul says. Do not pass

out God's judgment. Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. And second, Do NOT try to be less than you are. As a follower of Jesus, do not be indifferent to the pain in the world. Do not ignore the suffering around you. But do not be consumed by self-righteous anger either. Follow Jesus. Live like Jesus. Embody Jesus. Like Jesus, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

First, Paul says, do NOT try to be more than you are. Do NOT try to be God. Do not put yourself in God's position. It is not up to you to judge the world for its crimes. Or to hand out punishment for the wrong-doings of others. It's not your job to fix the world or save the world or make the world right again according to God's will. That's not your job. Your job, Paul says, is to be faithful. To be faithful yourself with the way you live. You don't know enough the lives of others to judge them. You can't see enough of the past, present or future. Do not claim to be wiser than you really are, says Paul. That's not your job or the job of any other human being. It's God's job to sort everything out. "Vengeance is mine. I will repay." says the Lord.

There was a Community Forum last Sunday afternoon. People in Midway gathered to have an open conversation about racism. To talk honestly about prejudice and discrimination, which we don't always want to talk about in our nice little town. About how the world is not the same for black folks and other minority groups and for white folks. And someone said that she struggled with what to say when family members posted hurtful things on Facebook about 'those black people' or 'those Mexicans'. "What should I say?, she asked. What should I do when people write those terrible things in such terrible angry ways?" How many of us have wondered the same thing? When we have been horrified and infuriated by what we have read in a comment section on-line?

In the forum, most of us agreed Facebook was NOT the place to engage someone. I know I have had to learn that lesson. That in those impersonal settings, you are NOT going to change anyone's mind. Not even if your post is clever or carefully crafted. Or if it's a long heart-felt rant. You won't change anyone or fix anything by shouting at someone on-line or in person. But we can become consumed with trying to. With

trying to teach someone a lesson. I know I have spent hours lying awake at night, trying to come up with a zinger that would ZING shut down the bullies at school. Or the bullies at work or in the world. And how good it would feel to put them down. And how good it would be. But will it DO good?, the apostle Paul asks. Will you overcome evil, or will you just become part of it?

Sometimes, I want to hurt the ones who hurt me. When someone has made me feel bad, I want to make them feel bad too. As the character Lenny once said on the Simpsons TV show, “There’s nothing like revenge for getting back at people.” “Yeah,” says his friend, Carl, “and vengeance isn’t too bad either.” It feels good to return hurt for hurt and pain for pain and give them what they’ve got coming. But the apostle Paul says, that’s NOT our job. It’s not our job to punish. It’s not our job to make others pay. It’s God’s job and God’s responsibility. God has taken off our shoulders the work of sorting people out and saving the world!

Now I know we need justice. We need law and order in our society. We need penalties and restrictions to keep people in check. But what does

Jesus have to say about this? What does Jesus instruct us to do? Well, frankly, Jesus isn't much help when it comes to law and order. In our reading from the gospel of Matthew, he tells us to deny ourselves and lose our lives and take up our crosses and follow him. He tells his disciples that that means suffering for others; and laying down our lives down for others; and being condemned and crucified when others are in the wrong. It means forgiving instead of retaliating. Surrendering justice to God instead of doing justice ourselves. "No, Jesus, no, no, no, hold on," says Peter. "That can't be how it works. This can't be how God works. That can't be how you, Jesus, will save the world." Peter says what we are all thinking, that this can't be how you fix things. And you know what Jesus says to Peter? He says, "Get behind me, Satan. Don't tempt me to be someone else. Don't tempt me with vengeance and violence and anger. I mustn't be overcome by evil. I must overcome evil with good." Jesus refuses to do anything but be faithful, and turn the other cheek and love his enemy and pray for his persecutors. And he calls us to do the same. To follow him in faith and obedience. To follow

him in trusting God's promise that even when Good Friday happens, Easter Sunday will follow.

Let God be God. Do not try to be more than you are, says Paul, first of all. And second, do not try to be less than you are. Do not lag in zeal. Do not be indifferent or silent. Do not be overcome by evil; overcome evil with good.

Now this, of course, is a lot easier said than done. This is the very hardest part of faith. This is the masters' level class. The PhD course for Christians. And it takes a whole lot of commitment. And a whole lot of trial and error. And a whole community of people who can help one another to believe the impossible; that you don't overcome evil with evil; it can only be overcome by good, the kind of good you find at the cross.

It's easy to be overcome by evil. To be slowly worn down by it. To be tempted into those seemingly harmless activities of gossip and rumor-spreading and criticism of others. It doesn't really hurt anyone and besides it makes us feel better to put others down. But Paul has the harshest things to say about churches that act like that; that are bound up

in bickering and quarrels and factions and angry opposition. Who would rather talk the talk than walk the walk when it comes to loving one another. Do not be haughty, Paul says. Do not think yourselves better than others or wiser than others. Don't be less than you are. Evil wants to keep you from being God's love in the flesh. Evil wants to keep you from being the body of Christ in the world. It wants to keep you from the things that are GOOD: rejoicing with those who rejoice; weeping with those who weep. Contributing to the needs of others. Extending hospitality to strangers. Associating with the lowly.

Overcome evil by doing good. And if that means protesting, then go and do so. But don't stop there. Don't let your passion for the good stop at a rally. Go out and give it to evil, by doing good. Go volunteer at the food bank. Go pack some backpacks. Go, get involved at your school. Be a mentor at the youth group. Be a family advocate in the court system. Give money to help with Presbyterian Disaster Relief. Or just talk to your neighbors. Even if you don't think you agree with them. Especially if you don't agree with them. Invite them over for dinner. Or to come

play board games together. Because Evil hates that kind of stuff. Evil hates fun. It hates people enjoying life together.

Overcome evil with good. With hope. With generosity. With patience and perseverance and a steadfast willingness to suffer and never give up. For God's sake, for the sake of our salvation, goodness will not give up. Instead, goodness invites us to the table. To this table which isn't yours or mine. It is the Lord's. To receive mercy that isn't yours or mine. It is the Lord's. To eat Bread and drink from the cup. To have life that isn't yours or mine. It is the Lord's. To be the body of Christ. Which will not be overcome by evil. But overcomes evil with good.

Last Monday was the monthly Community dinner at Midway Christian Church. As usually there was GREAT food and all kinds of people. Black, white, rich, poor. All gathered together, eating together. Talking together. Sharing together. And Fatuma and her family, refugees from the Congo, were brought in by Sally Kinnaird and by Agatha from Pisgah Presbyterian and by Mary from Versailles Presbyterian. And there was nothing at all quiet about that room. It was people there to be there together, to share in what is good together. And I thought, take that

evil. Take that, darkness. Take that, strife and division. Take that, evil and despair. We are going to hold fast to what is good together.

In the midst of anger and fear and hatred, do not give up hope. Do not stop believing in the way of the cross. Do not repay evil for evil. Do not try to more than you are or less than you. But be the image of Christ in the world. Be the body of Christ for the world. Do not be overcome by evil. But overcome evil with good.