**September 3, 2017**

**Romans 12:9-21**

Eric Rudolph set off a pipe bomb outside the 1996 Olympic grounds in Atlanta. One person was killed and more than 100 others were injured. At his sentencing hearing, two of his victims responded in an amazing way. Fallon Stubbs, the daughter of one of those killed by the bomb (and she herself, wounded), offered Mr. Rudolph forgiveness. "Because of you," she said, I have become a tolerant person. Not for you, but for me, I forgive you. I look at you. I love you ... and if I cry," she added, "it's not for me. It's not for my mother. It's not for my father. It's [tears] for you." Another victim, Memrie Creswell, said after the hearing, “I'm going to trump his evilness with love for the rest of my days."

In 2015, a young white man brought a gun to a Bible study at an African American Baptist church in Charleston, South Carolina. He killed 9 people. Their family members faced him in the courtroom only a few days later. Not one person responded with vengeance or demands for his own life in payment. They all offered him forgiveness. The sister of one victim said, “I acknowledge that I am very angry, but… we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive.” Another person “said that the pleas for Dylan’s soul were proof that ‘hate won’t win.’” [[1]](#footnote-1)

These words are powerful because they fly in the face of the human temptation to retaliate. Most people return pain with anger and thoughts of revenge and retribution. Those who *don’t* do that are generally met with incredulity, and questions of sainthood. Most of us find it incomprehensible to meet deep pain with love or grace or even peace. And yet, there are hundreds of cases of individuals offering forgiveness to their persecutors.

So Paul wrote, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Practicing this individually is its own challenge, but one that we may accomplish through prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit, who promises “peace that transcends understanding.” But Paul did not write this letter to an individual. This passage was not meant to be guidance for our individual behavior. Paul wrote this to the community, encouraging them to work together in this practice. And that is a greater challenge. To convince an entire community that they will not respond to violence with violence.

This was one of the troubles in the Civil Rights movement of the United States. Whereas Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference advocated nonviolence and peace in the face of persecution, other groups wanted a more physical response.

But it can be done. There are communities who have achieved consensus in their peaceful response to persecution. After decades of abuse and apartheid, South Africans extended forgiveness to their persecutors. As a country, they pursued truth and reconciliation about the crimes that had been committed during these years. Amnesty was granted to hundreds of perpetrators.

Unfortunately, the South African response did not end hate-crimes there, nor was their model adopted by other countries. The United States practices retribution at every level of our justice system. From juries’ who sentence criminals to the death penalty, to our international policy-makers, it is rare to hear mercy and blessing in response to persecution. These verses in Romans were not the guiding principal of Presidents George W. Bush or Barrack Obama when they hunted Osama bin Laden. Instead, they (and others) continually spoke about vengeance for our country’s suffering on September 11, 2001. These verses do not shape our National Security Team or the Pentagon brass, who still reference revenge when discussing conflict in the Middle East. Nothing has changed. These verses have not been used in regard to North Korea’s actions in recent weeks. If we were to “Bless those who persecute you," we might pray for those who are hungry in North Korea, or support educational opportunities for children in Afghanistan, or invest in fair business and labor practices in China.

“Bless those who persecute you.” Paul and other biblical writers placed revenge exclusively in the hands of God. The score is not ours to settle. Only God has that responsibility. Instead, “do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” So we don’t need to have the last words or the best words in an argument with our spouse or our children, we only need to have kind words. We don’t need to edge another driver out, but can make room for them as they merge. We don’t need to judge those who leave their shopping carts randomly scattered through the parking lot, but can return their carts for them. (a misplaced shopping cart may not be “evil” incarnate, but it can be a major minor irritant in life)

Author and pastor Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "The only way to conquer evil is to absorb it. Take it into yourself and disarm it. Neutralize its acids. Serve as a charcoal filter for its smog. Suck it up, put a straitjacket on it and turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure."

The victims of Eric Rudolph and Dylan Roof used their courtroom encounters to try and disarm evil in some way. They turned the whole mess over to God, so that they could again breathe in the pure air of a different future. A Spirit-filled breath.

To engage evil – big or small – requires awareness and intentionality. It doesn’t just *happen*. We must practice blessing small evils and annoyances (like forgotten shopping carts), and extending mercy in simple situations so that we grow stronger to do so in bigger situations. As my wise husband told me last week, “you can’t love someone **and** keep your foot on their throat.” So we practice kindness to those who may not deserve it, and love for those who won’t return it, and even mercy to those who do not offer it to others.

But how? How do we both raise our awareness and lower our fight response and begin to bless (instead of curse or remain silent or run away)? A seminary professor of mine had a habit of starting every class he taught, and every worship service he led, with mindful breathing. Every group interaction began by centering everyone’s attention and joining their breath into one. He said,

Breathe in God’s mercies, breathe out God’s mercies for others.

Breathe in God’s grace, breathe out God’s grace for others.

Breathe in God’s peace, breathe out God’s peace for others.

This breathing enlarges each individual’s focus from *one* to all. It creates space – a moment for quietness and reflection. It acknowledges our presence in the world, and the possibility that we could change the world with our very breath. And it claims God’s presence in the group and in the space. Sometimes when I am sitting in a doctor’s office, or waiting at a stoplight, or on an airplane, and feel a group of people growing anxious, I return to this breathing practice.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” We do not act on our own strength, but respond to God’s presence already there. God’s goodness is stronger than any evil we may encounter in the world. God’s light is brighter than darkness.

There are many many places and situations where evil threatens to overcome the good. Political, social, and personal. Over the last week, we watched the water rise in Texas and Louisiana, destroying people’s lives in its path. As soon as disaster looms, evil creeps closer. There were immediate reports of looting and scamming of victims. But there are also reports of people working for good in the midst of the chaos. President Jimmy Carter wrote an editorial yesterday, reflecting on how people respond to major disasters. He wrote,

“When the waters rise, so do our better angels… Pick a past disaster, and I’ll tell you at least a dozen stories that stand as living testaments to our collective compassion, generosity – and unity… Anytime people come together in common purpose, miracles happen. We’ve seen elections proceed fairly, houses go up, diseases nearly disappear. But only because people of goodwill make it so. Unfortunately, we all know that’s not the world we live in every day. Instead, we seem trapped in a never-ending storm of rancor, divisiveness and distraction. How much could we accomplish together, though, if we were able to see the world every day the way we see the world after a disaster? Neighbors in need. People with resources. All of us in this together… Remember what can happen when we love our neighbors as ourselves.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

May we remember every day to love our neighbors as ourselves, not as the strangers or enemies they may present themselves to be. We are “in it together” with them. We are all God’s children, hungry, sitting at the Table, waiting to be fed, desperate for a blessing. Thanks be to God for his abundant grace and mercy, inviting us to draw nearer.

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/19/i-forgive-you-relatives-of-charleston-church-victims-address-dylann-roof/?utm\_term=.ac2132a71419 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/02/opinions/help-harvey-recovery-jimmy-carter/index.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)