

Victory With Christ

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Isaiah 53:1-12; Romans 12:9-21; John 13:1-15, 33-35

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” -- Romans 12:21

The reading from Romans we heard earlier in the service was a request from you. You asked me to preach on a passage that the editors of the NRSV call the “Marks of the True Christian.” That’s not a bad description of the passage, although they might have come a bit closer if they’d called it “The Marks of True Christian Wannabes,” because the passage is a list of exhortations rather than descriptions. Paul is writing to the Christians at Rome urging upon them a series of dispositions and behaviors that he believes distinguishes followers of Jesus from your average Jane or Joe Roman. He’s not saying the Christians in Rome are doing these things, but he hopes they will. These exhortations collectively make up the sort of life to which Christians might reasonably aspire. Let’s take a few minutes this morning to look more closely at that list.

The first thing we should note is that Paul packs an awful lot into a relatively brief passage. Depending on how you count them, Paul tells the Romans to do between 25 and 30 things in these 12 verses. Do this, do that, don’t do the other thing. Bam, bam, bam. Paul fires instructions at these poor folks so rapidly no one could have remembered them all, which is probably why they came to Rome in written form.

“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,” and so on. Paul virtually showers these new Christians with instructions on how to walk their new walk with Christ, and that’s the first thing we might take away from this passage: there’s a lot to live if you want to live as a Christian.

I’ve often said to you that Christianity isn’t complicated, it’s just hard, and here’s an example of what makes the Christian life hard. When Paul says, “Let love be genuine,” it’s pretty clear what he means. Don’t love with artificial love. Don’t love with a love that’s only words or superficial gestures. Give your thoughts, feelings, words, and actions the integrity of consistency. Open yourself up to the Holy Spirit so regularly and so thoroughly in prayer that the love you have for the world is less and less your love and more and more God’s love.

A few lines before our passage Paul says that his hearers should avoid being conformed to this world, but should be transformed by God – and that transformation includes the way we love. Too often we Christians love just as everyone else loves: we love the good people and we hate the bad people. And the good people are the people who love us in return.

Jesus warned us about that trap, though. “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

It’s that more that distinguishes the follower of Jesus, that sets her or him apart from the great wash of humanity. When everyone else is calling for someone’s blood –

like the members of Isis or Isil or the Islamic State right now – do we do the same? When everyone else is demanding that our legislators and judges get tough on crime, do we join that punishing chorus? When everyone else asks “What’s in it for me?” are we asking the same question?

It’s always struck me as more than a little ironic that the states that report the highest percentages of church-going Christians are also the states with the highest rates of incarceration, the highest rates of capital punishment, the highest rates of poverty and malnutrition, and the highest approval rates for military intervention to resolve conflict. Statistics like those make me wonder how much Christian transformation has really gone on in such places, and how genuine the Christian love there really is.

I’ve spent the last three or four minutes now preaching on the first mark of a true Christian, and there are about 25 left in Paul’s list, so at this rate, I’ll still be preaching 75 minutes from now, probably just to Mary, Dan, Joan, and Karen.

So let me commend the rest of that list to you for your own reading and meditation this afternoon or this coming week, and let me jump to the point of that list, which is found in the last verse, which is this morning’s text: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

That whole long list could be summarized in that one exhortation: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” That, above all else, is the mark of a true Christian – someone out there in the world, trying to overcome evil not with more evil, but with good. Trying not to add to the world’s suffering, but to relieve it. Trying to break that cycle of violence not with more violence but by not being violent in return. Paul’s words aren’t a call to a pious withdrawal from the world’s problems; they’re just the opposite. They’re the call to arms for the true followers of Jesus in their struggle with a world that’s lost its way: “overcome evil with good.”

We Christians have been trying to do this for a long time, and at certain points in history we’ve been better at it than at other points. I don’t know if any of you pay much attention to what’s happening with our prison system right now, but it’s a disaster. The United States puts more people behind bars relative to our population than any nation on earth. We currently imprison 716 of every 100,000 people in this country, the vast majority of them poor, black, and Latino. By comparison, Canada imprisons 117 people per 100,000, Spain imprisons 159 per 100,000, and Japan imprisons only 59 people per 100,000.

And our prisons are overcrowded, violent, and crime-ridden. And if you’re convicted of a felony in this country, forget ever having a normal future. We continue to punish felons for decades after their conviction by denying them certain jobs, security clearances, and in some states the right to vote – forever.

This is Christian behavior? This is showing God’s love for the world? This is people living lives made new by Jesus Christ? I don’t think so. Quakers invented the penitentiary as a place where people who had done wrong could be given the chance to reform and try again, but our prisons have become so brutal and inhumane that people coming out are almost always worse criminals than when they went in. And this is a scandal that many of us Christians are choosing to ignore.

It’s a whole lot easier to say, “Just lock ‘em up and throw away the key” than it is to work with someone who’s done wrong to help them get his or her life back on track. If our prison system should tell us anything, it should tell us that attempting to overcome evil with more evil doesn’t work. You overcome evil with good. Jesus said it, Paul said it, and all the great Christian thinkers have said it, and that’s what makes Christianity hard. It’s hard to resist the fear that anti-social behavior produces. It’s hard to resist the temptation to put as much distance between ourselves and a wrong-doer as possible. It’s

hard to demand truth and justice and fairness for everyone when giving into laziness and prejudice would be so much quicker and easier. It's not easy being a Christian. But Jesus never said it would be.

Some people say that the teachings of Jesus were never meant to be public policy; I disagree. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," he was talking about the peacemakers in public – his followers making peace out there in the public square where violence is so often used to intimidate and suppress.

Will any of us in our generation forget the image of the lone Chinese man standing before a line of tanks in Tiananman Square in 1989? We don't know who that incredibly brave individual was, and we don't know what became of him. He's been called Tank Man or the Unknown Protester, but who can forget that image of him standing there, unarmed, all by himself, confronting the military might of one of the most powerful and repressive regimes on earth. He wasn't able to keep those tanks permanently out of Tiananman Square, or the tear gas or the bullets that eventually claimed hundreds of Chinese lives. But that image, suppressed so thoroughly in mainland China that many young people there today don't know anything about the uprisings in June of 1989 – that image of the lone protester continues to inspire people all around the world with the conviction that we can bring about change through peaceful means. It may take a very long time, but it can be done. Evil can be overcome by good.

I want to close now by reminding all of us that the ultimate freedom fighter was Jesus Christ. I say that not only out of theological conviction, but also on the basis of historical fact. When Jesus lived, there were plenty of groups fighting for the independence of the Jewish people from their Roman overlords. One group, mentioned in the New Testament, was the Zealots; another, mentioned by the historian Josephus, was the Sicarii, literally, "stickers," that is, people who murdered people by sticking them with small, sharp daggers.

Jesus, who hated the Roman oppression of Palestine as much as anyone, had the opportunity to join these groups, and one of his apostles, Simon the Zealot, may even have done so. But Jesus refused to take up the sword or even a little dagger. He refused to join the armed resistance movements that popped up all over Judea and were suppressed quickly and brutally by the Romans in a hideous version of whack-a-mole.

Instead, Jesus used the most powerful weapon any of us ever has – the power of self-giving love – to wage a one-man campaign against the most powerful and brutal regime of its day: Jesus the Christ versus the Roman legions. Who won?

There are literally billions of us 2,000 years later who follow Jesus Christ, but not a single legionnaire. And that, friends, is all the proof I need that we'll win. We won over the Romans, we won over the Vandals, we won over the Goths, the Huns, and the Nazis. And we'll win against Isis or Isil or any other group, large or small, that thinks that it can preserve itself through violence.

We won not because we fought their violence with our own brand of violence and won, but rather because we offered then and continue to offer now a way of life that will always draw people to itself. People can claim to be spiritual but not religious all they want, but I'll take Christ any day. I'll take the Prince of Peace to be my lord and my savior; I'll take his people to be my people; and I know that sooner or later, in one way or another, I will be with him when all the forces of violence have blown themselves and each other into oblivion. The victory of Christ is not the victory of might; it's the victory of right, and it belongs to those who will take up their cross as he took up his, and follow him. Trust me, people, we'll win. Better yet, trust him.