

Proper 17: Becoming an Adult

Romans 12: 9-21; Matthew 16: 21-28; Jeremiah 15: 15-21

- In 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt invited the great contralto opera star to come to the White House and sing before the King and Queen of England.
 - This caused quite a stir among some Americans, including a lady from Georgia, who wrote:
 - Dear Mrs. Roosevelt. I don't understand how you, as a good Christian woman, could invite a colored person into the White House..." and the letter went on...
- This just brings to mind that the major symbol of the Ku Klux Klan is is cross and that a number of hate groups have the word "Christian" included in their names.
- It also brings up the question: "What does it mean to be a Christian?"
 - Fortunately for us gathered here, St Paul answers that question for us in our reading today
 - This week's lesson from Paul to the Romans teaches us what it means to be a Christian, and more importantly, a Christian who acts like an adult in their faith.
- Paul's letter also led to my wonderment on how to address the hatred and the haters we see around us...
 - And that leads to my asking for help in a couple of projects
 - One we can rejuvenate
 - One we can initiate ... to better fulfill the mission that Paul gave to the Romans and gives us today.

Paul: How to be an Adult Christian in an Unfriendly World

- How do we live out our Christian faith?
 - That is the question that Paul answers in the 12th Chapter of his letter to the church in Rome.
 - We heard the opening 8 verses of this Chapter last week, when we heard this very important word, "Therefore"
- In the previous 11 chapters Paul lays the theological groundwork for this chapter:

- He writes about Jesus and the Law, justification by faith, dying and rising with Christ, the salvation of the Gentiles,
- Then with all 11 chapters of theology as background, Paul writes this word: “Therefore”
 - Therefore, “because of all that God has done for you” (which he’s described in the previous 11 chapters) “let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn God’s will for you...”(NLT)
- Therefore, Paul describes for the Romans what it means to live as an adult Christian, in terms of the Christian community (in the first 13 verses) and in terms of the outside world (starting in v. 14, which begins, “Bless those that persecute you...”

Acting as Christian Adults in our Own Community

- For Paul, the first 13 verses indicate that being an adult Christian in community, means loving one another.
 - Not just feelings that Christians have for one another, but the practical care for each other that was a feature of the early church.
 - Paul writes “let love be genuine” and then provides a bullet list about how that genuine love should manifest itself in community:
 - Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically.
 - Rejoice in our confident hope.
 - Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying.
 - When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them.
 - Always be eager to practice hospitality

Our Responsibilities as Christian Adults in the Community at Large

- Thus far Paul writes about how the Christian community should take care of one another
 - But in V. 14, Paul shifts his attention to how should Christian adults treat those who would attack and harm them?

- For Paul, it's a given that persecution will come to those who take up their cross and follow Jesus.
 - And the appropriate response to persecution is blessing, not cursing.
 - Do not curse your persecutors, do not repay evil for evil; do not perform acts of vengeance
 - "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, given them something to drink
 - "In doing this you will heap burning coals upon their heads"
 - And, taken in context, the "coals of fire" are almost certainly intended as the burning shame of remorse for having treated someone so badly.
- It would seem that when Paul commands us to Love and to not perform acts of vengeance, he makes it perfectly clear that love and hate are things we can chose to do. It is our choice
 - We can hate Muslims, but we don't have to. It is our choice.
 - We can hate black people, or white people or Polynesian people, but we don't have to. It's our choice.
- Quaker pastor Phillip Gulley writes that
 - "Hatred is the refuge of those who won't grow up. Haters are moral infants, perennial children, tantrum throwers who haven't gotten their way. When my six year old is that way, I can understand it. I don't excuse it, but I understand. Then I work hard to make sure he doesn't stay that way. I let him know in no uncertain terms that hatred is not acceptable. It is scary to think how many people turn their children loose in the world without even teaching them that."

Not Repaying Evil for Evil on the Global Stage

- Recent events are proving how correct Paul was when he wrote that we should not curse our persecutors, that we should not repay evil for evil.
 - Repaying evil for evil is the tactic used by the anti-facists
 - The antiracists have as their foundational belief the concept that because Nazism and white supremacy are violent, we must use any means necessary to stop them.

- Paul writings speak forcefully against this philosophy
 - And there are those who say that the statements by Paul (and by Jesus) about not returning evil with evil is just fanciful dreaming with no basis in the real world.
 - Well, let's look at the real world:
- Berlin, 1927, when the newly born Nazi Party announced that they would hold a rally in the Wedding district of Berlin
 - Hundred of Nazi Party members came to Wedding. Hundreds of opponents showed up. A massive brawl ensued. Hundreds were injured.
 - The people of Wedding felt they had won the day. They had sent a message that racists were not welcome.
 - But the real tragedy of this incident was that it fed an escalating spiral of street violence.
 - It also gave the Nazi Party to paint itself as the victims of lawless leftist hoodlums
 - Many Germans who opened their morning newspaper saw the continuing cycle of violence and what seemed to border on a civil war rising in the country.
 - People began to believe that the government needed special police powers to stop the violent leftists.
 - The fact that the Nazis were stirring up the violence didn't seem to matter.
 - One Hitler's biggest steps in taking complete control over Germany was when he announced that he needed special police powers to control the leftist violence.
 - So how do we put Paul's writings into practice when we're faced by those who hate?
 - The Southern Poverty Law Center suggests a number of good means to take non-violent action¹
 - Just one example: Hold a counter-protest that isn't close to the haters. Organize a joyful protest away from them.
 - Deny them the confrontation and the ensuring media circus they want.

¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/20170810/alt-right-campus-what-students-need-know>

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Proper 17

- Reading the Southern Poverty Law Center's guidance makes me wonder about the face-off on the corners of 12th and Commercial.
 - Perhaps moving the venue or having a different demonstration might change the dynamic.
 - Or having the peace and justice people hold up their signs on the NW corner of 12th and Commercial, the one usually occupied by the War Party might also change the dynamic

Amnesty International

- It *is* possible, in a nonviolent way- to heap coals upon the heads of the haters.
 - I look at the recent work done by those who write on behalf of Amnesty International
 - In convincing the haters that the whole world is watching, and prisoners can't just be disappeared, and no one will know.
 - With enough coal on their heads, the North Koreans were persuaded by Amnesty International writers to release a Canadian Pastor who had spent 2½ years in a labor camp, while under a life sentence at hard labor.
 - With enough coal on their heads, the Sri Lankan courts granted an order preventing the police from continuing their repeated questioning and harassment of a Jesuit priest who had hosted a memorial for the war dead.
 - The list goes on: I have my own story from my associate in The Hague, Ambassador Carl Niehaus, who was jailed for many years by the Apartheid Government in South Africa and who credits the letters from AI for keeping him alive.
- We Christians can let the divine love of God show through us to the world.
 - We can do that in ways big and small in Anacortes.
 - I could use help in Reviving the AI letter-writing campaign again. Help in sorting through the myriads of cases at the Amnesty USA web site to find one a month for which we can draw up a petition

Neighbors in Faith

- At last week's Theology Potluck, Pastor Terry Kylo talked about his Neighbors in Faith program - an effort to encourage neighborly relationships between Muslims and peoples of all faiths.
- He noted that this might be difficult to do on a local level, given the apparent lack of Muslims in Anacortes.
 - But he did suggest that there are other minorities here with whom we could become better neighbors...for example the Samish Nation who people live in our midst.
 - There might be a number of way to connect in a more pro-active and useful way.
 - I have no idea where or how to begin that process.
 - Other than talking to tribal chairman Tom Wooten or secretary Dana Matthews, who I know on a working level and in our partnership in providing social services in Anacortes.

Finally

- In any event, I believe that it is up to us (crazy Episcopalians) to show Anacortes and the world that we can overcome evil with good.
 - It is not always the way we are familiar with, and it is certainly not the way most of the world seems to work.
 - It is simply the way we must live our lives as adult Christians.