

Sermon for 11 Pentecost Yr A, 28/08/2011  
Based on Rom 12:9-21  
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“A living faith”

In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Snoopy the dog is resting on top of his doghouse and Lucy comes up to him and says: “I just don’t understand you! You lead such a useless life! You don’t contribute anything! You...” and then she is interrupted as Snoopy stretches over to Lucy and kisses her on the nose. In the last frame, Snoopy says to himself, “A kiss on the nose does much toward turning aside anger!”

In today’s passage from Romans, the apostle Paul reminds the Christians in Rome and us that belief and practice, doctrine and action, faith and life go hand-in-hand. A living faith, according to the apostle Paul, is real and true when it is practiced. Today’s second lesson is bursting with exhortations on how to live and practice our faith. Paul has included material in this passage reminiscent of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, along with quotes from Deuteronomy and Proverbs.

Rooted in love for God and neighbour; Paul includes at least six exhortations on how to deal with evil. He teaches us in verse nine to “hate what is evil.” In verse fourteen he counsels us to “Bless those who persecute you...do not curse them.” He continues with this message in verse seventeen by saying: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble [“honourable” in the Revised English Bible] in the sight of all.” Paul shifts the message slightly in verse nineteen when he allows for God’s wrath and vengeance: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written,”—then he quotes Deut 32:35—“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” In verse twenty, Paul counsels us to

offer hospitality to our enemies, and quotes from Proverbs 25:21-22: “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.” Scholars have wondered about this reference to burning coals and have offered a couple of comments. Martin Luther thought that it meant the enemies would regret what they had done when they received such hospitality. Another scholar—Roy Harrisville—has pointed out that there is an Egyptian tradition of placing coals of fire on one’s head as a rite of penitence.<sup>1</sup> In the final verse of today’s passage, Paul continues with his previous train of thought, emphasising the doing of good in the face of evil: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” The REB renders it like this: “Do not let evil conquer you, but use good to conquer evil.”

What is our response to Paul’s exhortations? Do you think Paul is being practical enough here? Do you agree with him? Or do you think he is too idealistic? Well, I agree with him, even though I confess to not being able at times to live up to his exhortations. Sinner that I am, I have fallen and failed; I keep falling and failing. Yet, I agree with him because of stories like the following, going back to the fifth century:

Out of Christian history comes an astonishing story of such an overcomer. His name was Telemachus, a monk who lived in Asia Minor around A.D. 400. Telemachus was deeply disturbed by the brutality and violence of the popular gladiatorial games of the Roman Empire. The Christian emperor Honorius was among those who watched these matches with regularity. Telemachus, burdened by such displays, one day took it upon himself to attend; as the fighting was at fever pitch, he jumped into the arena, between the gladiators. “In the name of our Master, stop fighting,” he cried. The warriors stopped, confused. But the spectators became furious. Turning into a mob, they advanced upon Telemachus with sticks and stones until he was beaten to death. Then a spirit of revulsion swept over the crowd.

Emperor Honorius abruptly left the Coliseum and the games were over. Shortly afterwards, Honorius passed an edict banning all future gladiatorial games. That one person, Telemachus, stood up to the evil of them, and their violence was halted.<sup>2</sup>

Telemachus is a wonderful example of how one person doing good in the face of evil can make a difference. Here I am also reminded of Mother Teresa's comment on one occasion, speaking of her work, she had this to say: "It's only a drop in the ocean—but the ocean wouldn't be the same without that drop." Or think of a stately cathedral. One brick or one stone may not seem like much—yet put them all together and they make a beautiful cathedral. So too, Christians together doing good can, by the grace of God, overcome and conquer evil and transform enemies into friends.

In New York [Martin Luther King] was autographing copies of one of his books when a demented black woman stabbed him. He was within a fraction of an inch of death. So near was the knife to piercing the aorta the surgeon said that if King had sneezed he would have died. He said of the woman who stabbed him: "This person needs help. She is not responsible for the violence she has done me. Don't do anything to her; don't prosecute her, get her healed."<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, of course, went on to be one of the most famous agents of peace and non-violent change in the United States in the twentieth century. Thanks to him and the good work he did in the face of evil and in loving his enemies—the United States changed their oppressive racial laws, improving the quality of life for millions of American blacks.

Yes it is difficult at times to do good in the face of evil and to love one's enemies. However, Paul is correct, doing good, by the grace of God, in the face of evil and by loving one's enemies, can transform the enemy by breaking the vicious cycle of hatred and violence. Paul himself should know, since, you remember, he was the arch-enemy of the first generation Christian Church. He was out to hunt down,

capture, and even execute Christians. Paul wanted to wipe out of existence the Christian Church. However, God had other plans. Paul witnessed the martyrdom of Steven. Steven's last words echoed those of Jesus on the cross. Steven prayed that his executioners would be forgiven for killing him. Paul most likely overheard those words of love and forgiveness. The words lodged deep within his heart, mind and soul. Then, one day on his way to Damascus, Jesus revealed himself to Paul and called him to be transformed from an arch-enemy to a devout disciple; from persecuting Christ and his Church to preaching Christ and founding Christian congregations all over the Mediterranean world. Ever since then, Paul's story of transformation from persecutor to disciple of Jesus has been repeated countless times and continues to do so even today.

So never underestimate the power of doing good in the face of evil and in the presence of your enemies. You never know how the LORD can work, by his grace, through your goodness to transform others. Together we can make a huge difference for Jesus and his Church. Let us pray: Jesus, grant us grace to follow your perfect example of overcoming evil with good and loving our enemies and transforming them into friends. In your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

1 Roy Harrisville, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), p. 201.

2 John H. Townsend, "Overcome Evil with Good," in: James W. Cox, Editor, *The Minister's Manual (Doran's) 1993 Edition* (New York & San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers & HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 177.

3 Wm. Barclay, *Men And Affairs* (London & Oxford: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1977), p. 57.