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Romans 12,16-21

Epiphany 3 — 22 January 2017

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the First Lesson from Paul's Letter to the Romans, which was read earlier:

Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: It is said that there is an old Italian saying that "revenge is a dish best tasted cold" – but it seems that it is attributable to other cultures as well.

There are times when people hurt other people. Individuals can get hurt. Families can get hurt. Rather than just lash back in a fit of rage, this saying tells people to cool their jets. Let time take its course. When enough time has passed so that the initial injury is almost forgotten, then, wham! Get even!

The problem with this course of action is that when hit back, people retaliate. It doesn't matter whether the retaliation is deserved, human emotions almost demand retribution. Now, with retaliation, people, families, or even nations, enter into a tit-for-tat battle and the cycle of revenge, hatred, and vengeance continues downwards.

Within this tit-for-tat cycle of mutual retaliation, there is an even worse problem. Regardless of who started what, soon both sides are indistinguishable from one another. Both have become enslaved to hatred and violence. Both are consumed with the idea of getting even.

Whole societies can get caught up in this cycle and generations can be raised with an irrational hatred against a supposed enemy. One need only look around and see clashes between Israelis and Palestinians, ethnic hatreds in the Balkans, hatred between Indians and Pakistanis, hatred between Tootsies and Hutus in Rawanda, and so on and so forth. Blood shed and revenge bring neither peace, nor comfort, nor even satisfaction. There is always another wrong to be avenged.

Is there a way out? Our text for today, echoing both Jesus and the Old Testament, does provide a way out. It is not the way of tasting revenge as a dish best served cold. It is definitely not tasting it as a dish served hot. As a matter of fact, it is best when not tasted or served at all.

This brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**Resisting Evil.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Who Is The Enemy?**
- 2) Jesus Defeated Our Enemies;** and,
- 3) Overcoming Evil With Good**

1) Who Is The Enemy? Will Rogers might have said that he never met a man he didn’t like, but the Scriptures are realistic enough to state that while that may be the case, there are people out there who may not like us.

But having said that, how do we recognize the enemy?

Perhaps the first clue is given in what Paul says immediately

before our text:

Do not be wise in your own estimation. (Romans 12,16b)

What does Paul mean?

It sometimes is pretty easy to figure out when people do not like us. It may even be that at time that dislike is justified. Perhaps at times we have not been the most likeable of people. But it may even be that there are people who wish us harm.

When someone says something nasty to us or perhaps even does something nasty, do we immediately think that the enemy is the person who has hurt us? Do we then think of an appropriate way to get back? At that point we have to step back.

We have to recognize that there is an enemy both outside of ourselves and within ourselves. What do I mean?

Outside of ourselves there is an ultimate enemy, the old evil foe, the devil himself. He is the one who always seeks to separate us from God by playing on our fears and through this trying to entice us to sin.

This enemy, however, has an accomplice within us — that is, our flesh.

When we are born, we are born enemies of God (Romans 5,10). The devil then masterfully plays on that enmity of the weakness of the flesh to entice people into retaliation. Retaliation at every slight, real or imagined.

But into this downward spiral of relation, of taking vengeance into our own hands, we see that:

2) Jesus Defeated Our Enemies. From the time of His birth, Jesus had enemies.

Think of King Herod the Great. What was his reaction at hearing that a King of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem? He was filled with fear and envy. He saw this Babe as a threat to his earthly throne. The devil played him perfectly. Herod then plotted to have the new born King killed. And so he sent his soldiers into Bethlehem to kill all males two years old and under — Herod wasn't taking any chances. But God told Joseph to flee before Herod's soldiers arrived.

During His earthly life, Jesus committed no sin. And yet His enemies multiplied against Him.

The high priests and Jewish establishment grew increasingly vengeful against Jesus. Some correctly saw that He was indeed the Son of God, but rejected His claim. Others became fearful that Jesus would disturb the peace and the Roman authorities would destroy their privileged place. Others became angry that Jesus clearly was not going to establish an earthly kingdom and destroy the Romans.

When the authorities finally arrested Jesus they could not come to an agreement on what the charge should be. Finally they told Pilate that Jesus was a king and thus a rival to Caesar — and if Pilate did not have Jesus put to death then they would go to Caesar and tell the Roman emperor that Pilate was not the emperor's friend.

Jesus went to the Cross. His enemies had conspired against Him. They thought that now would finally eliminate this threat to them.

But when Jesus went to the Cross, He went and took the false accusations with Him. But He did more. He also took all of the sins of humankind with Him. He took hatred and vengeance and enmity with

Him.

He died for His enemies. He died to reconcile them to God. And Jesus died also for us — to reconcile us to God as well. And Jesus died for the sins of all — to reconcile all mankind to God.

Mankind which stood condemned before God on account of its natural enmity toward God was now forgiven by Jesus' sacrificial death.

Jesus stood as silent as a sheep before its shearers, and as a lamb going to slaughter. Indeed, He was the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. He did not take vengeance into His own hands, but said, "Father forgive, for they know not what they do."

He was reviled, but did not revile in a tit-for-tat manner. He was cursed, but in return blessed.

He took the abuse, the pain, the suffering into death. He entrusted Himself to Him Who judges with justice.

And on the third day He rose from the dead.

With His resurrection, Jesus defeated sin and sin's wage, death. He earned for all the forgiveness of sins. With forgiveness Jesus turns us from the devil to God and turns us from following our natural inclinations of the flesh to being led by His Spirit.

This is the Spirit Whom He gives in Holy Baptism. This is the Spirit Who works through God's Word. This is the Spirit Who gives us the forgiveness in the true Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus urges us to:

3) Overcoming Evil With Good. Thus, Paul says,

Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good.

The natural temptation when confronted by evil, by enemies, is to react in kind. Tit-for-tat.

This was even recognized by the ancients. In Aesop's fables we read of the horse and the stag.

At one time the horse had the plain entirely to himself. Then a stag intruded into his domain and shared his pasture. The horse, desiring to revenge himself, asked a man if he were willing to help him in pursuing the stag. The man replied that if the horse would receive a bit in his mouth and agree to carry him, he would contrive an effective weapon against the stag. The horse consented and allowed the man to mount him. From that hour he found that instead of obtaining revenge on the stag, he had enslaved himself to the service of man.

Thus, in the same manner, when we give evil for evil, we are enslaved by evil, we are enslaved by the old evil one.

To this end, Paul would have us be overcome with the good of the forgiveness, which is ours only through Christ. Here, Paul speaks of returning good for evil, which would "heap coals of fire on his head."

The exact meaning of this phrase "heap coals of fire on his head" is difficult to determine. Some feel it refers to an ancient purification ritual from Egypt. However, it is doubtful whether Paul, or anyone else would have known of this. But it is sufficient to say that to repay with good may, and I say, may, convert the enemy, the sinner.

In the Book of Acts, we find Paul and Silas in jail. They spent the evening singing and praying. At midnight an earthquake struck the jail. Paul and Silas didn't escape. The jailer, at seeing the doors open was about to commit suicide, because better he should kill himself than face Roman punishment for letting his charges escape – he and his family would be sold into slavery. But Paul and Silas didn't escape. They told the jailer that they were still there. What was the jailer's reaction? The jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

But Paul realizes that while peace of Christ may lie within us, it may not lie outside of us. There may be those who are enemies and wish us harm. To these, in the next chapter, Paul speaks of the civil power, whose duty is to exercise the power of the sword to keep at least outward peace. As an aside, perhaps the cry for revenge goes up loudest when the civil government abdicates this power or weakens it. Furthermore, this teaching does not absolve us from the responsibility of defending our family or community. It does not absolve the magistrate of exercising power, nor of confusing the Kingdom of Grace with the kingdom of power exercised for the civil good.

Even within the church there are false teachers, enemies of Christ and His Gospel. But even here, we are not urged to retaliate. rather, as Paul says in the last chapter, we are to mark and avoid them. Hopefully this will open their eyes; but if not, we are not to engage in inquisitions or burnings at the stake, just mark and avoid.

When we may be overwhelmed by thoughts of revenge, let us take refuge in God's Word. Let us avail ourselves of the forgiveness won for us by Jesus Himself. Let us see there that Jesus has defeated our enemies. And as He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly, God Himself, so may we also entrust ourselves to our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion. What appears to be a hard teaching is in fact practical advise. It is practical in the sense that it permits us on a personal level to steer a middle course through this world, neither cringing cowardice nor rash acts of revenge. Rather, in as much as it lies within us, we are to disarm the powers of evil within and without. This disarming on a personal level can only be done through the forgiveness won for us by Jesus Himself. He has disarmed the powers so that we might be free of sin, death, and the power of the devil. Free to live and be overpowered with His goodness, His peace, and His gift of life. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church of the East Bay & Central Valley
21290 Birch St.
Hayward, CA 94541-1538

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