

SERMON
“Overcoming Evil with Goodness”
Romans 12:9-21 (NRSV)
August 30, 2020

A coach for a Pee Wee Baseball Team is obviously getting frustrated about something. At one point during the game, he says to one of his young players, "Do you understand what *cooperation* is? What a *team* is?"

The little boy nods in the affirmative.

"Do you understand that what matters is not whether we win or lose, but that we do it *together as a team*?"

Once again, the kid nods. Yes, he understands.

"So," the coach continues, "when a strike is called, or you're out at first, you don't argue or curse or attack the umpire. Do you understand all that?"

Again, the little boy nods his head yes.

"Good," says the coach. "Now go over there, and explain it to your mother."

Back in the first century, the apostle Paul, like this Pee Wee Baseball coach, gave us and the early church a pep talk about what it means to be a player on the team we call Christian. For starters, Paul encourages us to do the opposite of what people expect of us, especially when we are attacked. Instead of fighting fire with fire, Paul says, "*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*"

It appears that the first century church struggled as much as we struggle today at being Christ followers. The approach that many of us take is: "Don't get mad, get even." We heap and tweet curses on evildoers without even batting an eyelash. We want to fight back, counter-attack or even the score; but Paul calls us to "*bless.*"

"*At this point Paul stands firmly with Jesus,*" says pastor and scholar N.T. Wright; "*In both Jesus' teaching and his own practice there was a strikingly new note: Hostility was to be met with prayer, and violence with blessing.*"

Homiletics tells the story of a woman named Martha, who had a terribly difficult childhood: "*Mom regularly beat me with a strap,*" she recalls. "*She was mean even when I did nothing wrong. My dad was cruel for reasons I don't understand. He'd pack my lunch for school and often put a rock in it instead of a sandwich. As hungry as I was after school, I dreaded coming home.*"

When asked how she and her husband managed to raise a beautiful child of their own after the hellish childhood she had endured Martha said, "*I was determined to do the complete opposite of what my parents did for me.*"

Do the opposite?

Love instead of hate?

Bless instead of curse?

What a novel concept for us to do as Christians?

I think Jesus may have said something about it as well? In Matthew 5:44 didn't he tell us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? Paul says the same thing to us in Romans 12:17: "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*"

Paul also encourages us to live according to the values of the kingdom of God, instead of the values of this world. The world is "dog eat dog," implies Paul, with people competing fiercely and being willing to harm each other in order to succeed. But the values of God's kingdom, says Paul, invites us to "*live in harmony with one another.*"

There's an African story about a remote village called Shango Oba, whose people had a fine tradition of celebration. Always, when it was time for a feast, the whole village would gather, sitting cross-legged on the ground. The village elders would then carefully apportion the food, so everyone would have enough.

A young man from the village, named Jacob, received a rare invitation to study at an American university. He was away for many years, and became steeped in Western culture. Eventually, he returned home

to Shango Oba. To welcome him back, the people did what they did best: they put on a feast.

Jacob, however, was troubled by what he saw: "My family, I mean no disrespect, but why are you eating your food on the ground?"

"How would you expect us to eat: standing up or sitting in a tree?" asked one of the elders.

"No. Don't be ridiculous," said Jacob. "Civilized people sit at a table."

His response gave them pause to consider. If this is what the wise people of America did, there must be something to it. The village elders decided to bring a table into the village.

The table was just large enough to seat eight people. At every feast thereafter, the villagers quarreled over who those eight should be. Some said it should be the young men, for they had carried the new table into the feasting grounds. The women said it should be they who sat at the table, for they had prepared the food. "Such a sense of entitlement," thought the elders, shaking their heads. "It should be us," they declared. "Age has its privileges."

Something had happened at Shango Oba's feasting grounds that had never happened before. Peace had departed the village.

Finally, Jacob's father called him aside. "Look what you have done," he pointed out. "In the name of civilization, there is no purpose, no unity, no community."

Later that night, under the sliver of a moon, Jacob took an ax and chopped the table into many pieces. He picked up the pieces and laid one at the door of every house in the village. In the morning, he called the village elders together and explained what he had done. "I want to see unity and harmony return to Shango Oba."

That very day, the elders decreed it was time for another feast: to celebrate the end of the table.

Like the celebration of the end of the table, Paul encourages us to conquer our enemies in a most innovative way: *"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."* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching says of this most innovative way: By heaping burning coals on their heads *"we are burning away the hate within."* The commentary further says, *"Such treatment of opponents has as its goal reconciliation and peace, not another's defeat and suffering. That is the way God dealt with us when we were his enemies. That is the way God deals through us with those who continue to oppose him."*

Paul does not want Christians to be passive in the face of their enemies, rolling over and playing dead when confronted by evil. No, says Paul, take action: *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

In his book *The 48 Laws of Power*, Robert Greene tells of a speech Abraham Lincoln delivered at the height of the Civil War. In it, Lincoln referred to Southerners as fellow human beings who were in error. An elderly lady chastised him for not calling them irreconcilable enemies who must be destroyed.

"Why, madam," Lincoln replied, "do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

The unexpected and innovative design of the Christian's life is to overcome evil with good, instead of fighting evil with evil. If our enemies are hungry, we feed them. If they are thirsty, we give them something to drink. In the end, we destroy our enemies by turning them into friends.

"To transform an enemy into a friend requires one person to step forward and initiate the change," says blogger Suzanne Kane. *"That's often propelled by love, the kind of human emotion that forgives all slights, looks past harsh statements, past injustice, social pressure and aggressive actions and finds common bond."* Such a transformation is often grounded in what Jesus said during the Sermon on the Mount: *"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."*

When faced with an enemy, don't attack them. Instead, 'Golden Rule' them. Feed them. Give them a drink. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

The apostle Paul challenges us to do the opposite of what people expect of us, blessing instead of cursing. He invites us to live according to the values of the kingdom of God, instead of the values of the world. And he encourages us to conquer our enemies with kindness.

Yes, there is evil in the world, and Paul knows it. *"But God's people are to meet it in the way that even God met it, with love and generous goodness,"* says N.T. Wright. God knows that *"the way to overthrow evil,*

rather than perpetuating it, is to take its force and give back goodness instead.” That’s what Jesus did on the cross, and what we are challenged to do in daily acts of love and sacrifice.