

THE ETHICS OF HODGEPODGE
Rev. Jim Lowry
Transitional/Interim Pastor, Oakland Ave. Presbyterian Church

Romans 12:9-21

*Let love be genuine...
Hold fast to what is good...
Love one another...
Outdo one another in showing honor....*

I didn't select this text because it's Father's Day,
but it does kind of fit.
It's a list of what could be called good fatherly advice...
not just fatherly advice,
but also fatherly advice.

It really is quite a hodgepodge, you know...
this list of what the church is to do.
It's an impressive list,
but like other texts,
it's a little hard to know how one lives out such teachings
as we gather speed moving into the first decade of the twenty-first century.
It leaves us wondering
exactly how you play all this out
in a standard brand Presbyterian Church
in the first few years of a new millennium.

*Never flag in zeal...
Be aglow with the Spirit...
Serve the Lord...
Rejoice in your hope... (try preaching that in the Sudan)
Be patient in tribulation... (try preaching that on a street corner in Baghdad).*

Still, if we believe in Jesus,
this is the way we're supposed to act.
It's kind of the Heinz 57
of right living
drawn from Paul and dished up,
on the luck of the draw,
for a Lord's day that happens also to be Father's Day...
a kind of Pandora's box of doing right:

Be constant in prayer...
Make a pledge to the church and keep it... (I re-worded that one a little)
Practice hospitality...
Bless those who persecute you...
Rejoice with those who rejoice...
Weep with those who weep...
Live in harmony...
Don't be conceited....

It's a laundry list of ethical behavior
with no red thread running through it...
no common theme...
no common denominator...
no common theme until you get to the end of the list.

Listen to this:

Repay no one evil for evil...
If your enemy is hungry, feed him...
or her...
Do not overcome evil by evil...
Overcome evil with good.

Overcome evil with good???

Uuumph!

That's pretty radical...

too easy to say...

and far too hard to do.

Overcome evil with good, indeed.

I suppose human beings have wondered about
the origin and nature of evil
ever since we first came up out of the swamp.

It seems to me,

for us and others kin to us,
the question came most clearly into focus
when, in the providence of God,
we started to believe deeply in one God.

How can there be evil in a world made good?

If God is good why do bad things happen?

What *is* evil?

It's the question we re-play
as they yet scrap over a fitting memorial
on the site of the World Trade Center.
It's the same question we re-visit,
as we try to sort what it is we feel
when we see the picture of Zaraqawi's corpse
splayed on the front pages of our papers and news magazines.
Is it some perverse satisfaction or some unnamed revulsion
that attracts or repulse us?

Is evil what makes people kill each other in wholesale lots;
or is evil the spirit between us
when there is stone cold silence
at the breakfast table?

Is evil what makes the strong exploit the weak;
or is evil what makes the weak?

Is evil what drives the oil and drug cartels
or is evil what piles on the pressure
as each day we leave Eden and start to work?

Whatever it is...

*(Because we're who we are)
we are not to overcome evil with evil;
but (because we're who we are)
we are to overcome evil with good.*

Let me tell you what I mean.
I have raised some very intense questions
about which nothing can be made light;
but listen carefully
and see if in a bit of comic relief
you can find some intense truth
by which to live into hope.

Not long before we left Memphis to start an interim ministry trek,
a well known restaurant chain
advertised a Monday-through-Thursday two-for-one special
on their prime rib.

In those days I was taking Thursdays off
so on Thursday of that week

Martha and I decided to take advantage of the bargain
by going to an early movie
and then out for a quiet dinner
where we would blow our monthly allotment of red meat.

As it happened,
we were not the only ones
to have such an idea.
We arrived at the restaurant at 7:30,
just in time for our reservation.
The parking lot was packed.
I let Martha out at the door
to claim our reservation
and I started circling the lot
trying to find a parking space.
The second time past the door
Martha came out and said,

"Hurry up, our table's ready."

"Claim the table and order for me,
medium rare,
baked potato...butter only...
blue cheese on the side," I said,
as though after 40 years she didn't know such things about my taste buds.
"I'll be there in a minute."

Just then,
as luck would have it,
some folks came out of the restaurant.
I followed them to their car
and waited as they fumbled for keys;
and waited as the gentleman opened the door for his lady;
and waited as they made a nest in the car;
and waited as she put on lipstick;
and waited as she blotted her lipstick;
and waited as he adjusted the rear view mirror;
and waited as they finally put on seat belts;
and waited as they backed out at a snail's pace.

Then,
just as they were at long last backing out,
a big

white
luxury sedan
came bopping in right off the street,
into the parking lot
and, zap, right into MY parking place.

Now, people of God,
no matter the metaphysics of evil...

or its theological origins,

greed like that is evil's manifestation...

a minor manifestation, mind you;
but a manifestation all the same.

The white haired couple of shameless greed
bounced out of their luxury car
giggling and acting more immature
than any Presbyterian teen of my knowing.

Now.
It's test time.
I want you to take out your bulletin
and be ready to write your answer.
So far,
the story is absolutely true.
I'm going to give you
three possible conclusions to the story
only one of which is true.
I want you to write down the letter
corresponding to the conclusion
as you think the story really played out...
Was it:

A. As the greedy couple bounced giddily across the parking lot
I rolled down the window and snarled at the driver:

"Hey, buddy,
I hope you enjoy your dinner
but, when you choke on your prime rib,
I hope there's nobody in there
who knows the Heimlich maneuver."

Or was it:

B. I glared at the greedy couple with a look that would kill,
but said nothing; and
when I finally found another parking space,
I went inside,
where I was unable to enjoy my meal
until Martha rolled her eyes and me and said,

"Get over it
and eat your prime rib."

Or was it:

C. I went inside and,
seeing the greedy couple across the dining room,
I asked the waiter
to add their bill to our tab
and I sent them a note which said,

"Your meal is compliments
of the person in the parking lot...
the one in the modest dark green Saturn."

Well, which do you think it was for your transitional pastor...
this man of God...(?)
ordained by the church...(?)
set aside to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ...(?)
and foisted off on you for a season by your otherwise trusted pastor,

was it:

- A. Vitriolic Vengeance; or was it;
- B. Silent suffering; or was it;
- C. Radical grace returning good for evil?

I'll give you the answer at sermon's end,
but for now I'll give you a hint:

What I did was not particularly noble;

but, on the other hand,
despite my anger,
I did not bring overt shame on the church either;

and it occurs to me,
that's maybe mostly the way of it
for most of the people of God
getting by
in this work-a-day world
on this side of Eden:
We seldom do the really bad thing;
But we seldom do the really good thing either;
It seems to me we do a lot of suffering in silence.

Ooops!
I gave away the answer to the quiz, didn't I?
The answer is B.
I stewed inside but did nothing.

The implication of this gospel we follow
is pretty radical stuff, you know...
this Gospel of Jesus Christ
is not for sissies.

For preaching purposes,
this week's text follows logically
on the heels of the verses that immediately precede it.
In the verses before today's text
Paul makes the transition from *right belief* to *right behavior*.

We Presbyterians tend to like to take our cues from Paul,
especially I think from his letter to the Romans...
not just Presbyterians, of course,
but especially Presbyterians.

We like his kind of logic.

For eleven chapters,
as we have now divided it,
the letter to the church
describes in finest detail
what God has done:

"By grace we are saved through faith..."
said the letter to the church.

"The gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God..."²

said the letter to the church.

"If God is for us, who can be against us???"³

said the letter to the church.

On and on the letter goes
in this masterful expression
of Christian thought:

"We have been united with Christ in death,
we shall also be united with Christ in his resurrection..."⁴

"Nothing can separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord..."⁵

"We have peace with God through Christ..."⁶

and at last the apostle says to the church,
"now *therefore*,
on the strength of what God has done,
you do the right thing."

Actually,
first the apostle says
to trust God completely;
then the apostle says
for us to do the right thing.
To illustrate doing the right thing
the apostle gave us
this magnificent hodgepodge list of appropriate behaviors:

Let love be genuine...

Hold fast to what is good...

Love one another...

Never lag in zeal...

Be patient in tribulation....

Make a pledge to the church and keep it... (that's the one I edited)

Practice hospitality...

Bless those who persecute you...

Rejoice with those who rejoice...

Weep with those who weep...

Live in harmony...

Don't be conceited....

It really is a hodgepodge list,

gathered in from who-knows-where:

Some of it appears to have come from the Old Testament;
Some of it appears to have come from the Apocrypha;
Some of it came from other letters to the churches;
but almost nothing on the hodgepodge list
is original to this letter.⁷

Meaning no disrespect,

in some ways it is like the apostle borrowed
a little from the Rotary Club creed,
a little from the Boy Scout or Girl Scout motto, and
a little from Benjamin Franklin,
put them together in a list
and said
now, this is the way I want the church to behave...

your motive for right behavior is different now...
your motive for right behavior is born of your belief in Jesus;
but from this list of right behavior there is no red thread...

no common theme.....
no red thread

until the end;

but then, at last,
to the hodgepodge list,
gathered in from who-knows-where,
the apostle,
having done one important thing,
did a second important thing:

From the first he said
our motive for right behavior
is not like the Rotary Club
or the Scouts
or Benjamin Franklin.
Our motive for right behavior
is our belief in Jesus of Nazareth.

Then, at the end of the list,
he did the second great thing when he said
because we believe in Jesus

it is not enough
not to do the bad thing;
you must do the good thing.

And that just may be the greatest contribution we have to make
to the world into which
God has called us to be the church of Jesus Christ.

It's so basic,
but it just may be in the neighborhood
of most of the problem:

Not doing the bad thing is not enough.
Doing the good thing is what is needed.
Doing the good thing is what is inspired by Jesus.

Nita Pringle,
my friend and colleague
who until recently lived and preached in Wilmington, Delaware,
and now, like me, is doing interim ministries,
points to the perfect example.

Any parent of more than one child knows the familiar refrain.
It can happen on a family vacation of 2,000 miles
or on a trip to the grocery store of two blocks away.
One voice pops up from the back seat:

"Daddy, she hit me."

"He started it."

"Did not."

"Did too...you made a face."

Every parent knows better than to take sides
in such an argument.
Every parent also knows that,
as important as stopping the bad behavior is,
before it's really over,
in order to break the cycle
someone in the back seat
is going to have to do the good thing.⁸

Before it's really over,
someone in the back seat
is going to have to say,

"Here, would you like to play with my Teddy bear?"

They may be forty years old before they say it,
but someone's going to have to say it.

It's the same with husbands and wives;
It's the same with the Serbs and Croats;
It's the same with the Arabs and Jews;
It's the same with Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants;
It's the same with Sunni and Shiite Muslims;

It's the same with Whites and Blacks and Latinos and Asians;
It's the same with rich and poor;

It's the same with liberal Presbyterians and conservative Presbyterians;

It's the same with the Al Qaeda and the Americans...

as important as ending the evil behavior might be,
the whole warm truth is,
it's not going to be over
until someone does the good thing...

and that is very near the heart of the truth by which we live
and the truth we have to offer
a world made good in which evil happens.

This hodgepodge of ethics we have here
is quite a list...

Let love be genuine...
Hold fast to what is good...
Love one another...
Be patient in tribulation....
Make a pledge to the church and keep it...
Practice hospitality...
Bless those who persecute you...

Rejoice with those who rejoice...

Weep with those who weep...

Live in harmony...

Don't be conceited....

Of itself,

the list is quite a contribution

borrowed shamelessly by this preacher

from the old apostle

who, himself, borrowed it from who-knows-where.

It is, however,

the motive for obedience

that is the greater contribution.

For you and me the motive for such behavior is the grace of Jesus.

It follows,

for you and me the red thread through it all

is overcoming evil with good.

I do wish I had picked up the tab

for the white haired greedy couple's dinner.

It would have been the Christian thing.

Maybe there'll be another opportunity.

I'm sure of it.

There will surely be many more chances

to overcome evil with good.

I'm sure of it.

Aren't you?

James S. Lowry

Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church

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END NOTES

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- ¹ . Adapted from Romans 5 with apologies to the saints of Ephesus in whose letter the quote is, of course, much more direct.
- ² . From Romans 1:16
- ³ . From Romans 8:31.
- ⁴ . Adapted from Romans 6:5.
- ⁵ . Adapted from Romans 8:38 f.
- ⁶ . From Romans 5:1.
- ⁷ . Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV - Year A*, John Knox/Westminster, 1995. 465-6
- ⁸ . A version of this scenario was set up in Pringle's very helpful paper on the text which she presented to the 1996 meeting of the Movable Feast.