

Overcoming Evil with Good
August 28, 2011 Proper 17A
Romans 12:9-21
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I played football at good, old Beresford High School in South Dakota. The season of my sophomore year was one of the worst times of my life. I was on the varsity. There was a lot of hazing on the team. Almost all of it came from mean-spirited juniors. Before practice, they would line up in two parallel rows and then require us to run between them. As we did, they would bash our helmets with everything from chin straps to footballs to fists. After practice, they would look for the nearest mud puddle. They would order us to drop to the ground and roll through it. If that wasn't enough, there was the locker room. They would shove us into a mesh locker and spit on us. And when we came out, they would rub hot liniment all over our bodies and then howl with delight as we squirmed.

I lived in constant fear during that season. I felt as if there were only three ways to respond: 1) to toughen up and take it like a man, whatever that might mean; 2) to somehow try to get even, though that would have been suicidal; or 3) to keep my mouth shut, learn my lessons well, and earn the right to someday do the same thing to the underclassmen coming after me.

In today's Bible reading from Romans, Paul has some things to say about hazing and a variety of others situations we face in life. Paul has no less than thirty instructions to give us. All of them, I think, are meant to round out Jesus' command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Some of Paul's instructions are fairly easy: outdo one another in showing honor, contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers. Some of them are much harder: bless those who persecute you; live peaceably with all, do not repay anyone evil for evil. Hmm, I wonder if Paul ever had to go to football practice as a sophomore.

By way of background, Paul didn't know the congregation in Rome. His goal was to write a letter to them introducing himself and his teaching. But somewhere along the way, Paul must have gotten word that the church was experiencing problems. On the inside, there was sharp conflict between Jew and Gentile Christians. On the outside, there was ongoing tension between Christian and non-Christian neighbors. As you might

imagine, there were bad feelings and black eyes all over the place. Dorcas went to the 11:00 service so she wouldn't bump into Chloe who was a terrible gossip. Markus resigned from the church council because the pastor was pushing a change he didn't like. Aquilla stopped going to the Rotary Club because some of the members were calling him a Jesus-lover.

It was a mess. The mess was making it hard to be the church. You know how it is. We all say that God is love. We all agree that love is a wonderful thing...until we have someone we actually need to love. Pretty soon, especially if we've been on the receiving end of a really grievous wrong, all that good Christian charity is about the furthest thing from our minds. Bad feelings and black eyes do not lead to cozy church potlucks.

What happens to us in the process is fairly predictable. *This is clearly wrong*, we think. *I'm in a lot of pain here. How could they be so insensitive?* And if it's bad enough, we might even think: *Somebody needs to pay for this. I'll find a way to get even. Evildoers need to be stopped.*

What comes next? All too often the insult gets returned, a line gets drawn in the sand, and a cold war begins to settle in. We don't want to talk about it, at least not to the person who wronged us, and so we avoid that person like the plague. It's a script as old as time: you fight me and I will fight you back. It doesn't have to be fists. We do it with our silence as well.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story exploring this urge of ours to get even. The setting was her nephew Will's first birthday party. Will was as round and bald as a Buddha. He was an only child up to this point, so he was used to being the center of his parents' world. There were just a handful of guests at the party. After the cake and the singing and the presents, Will let everyone know how pleased he was by doing a little dance. Everyone gathered around him and admired the dance. Will was twirling his body and swirling his arms. The guests were delighted.

Finally, seven-year-old Jason had had enough. He charged through the circle, put both hands on Will's chest, and shoved him. Will fell hard. His head hit the floor with a crack. At first Will looked utterly surprised. No one had ever hurt him before, and he

didn't know what to make of it. Then he opened his mouth and bawled. But not for long. His mother scooped him up and hugged him, and put him back on his feet again.

Would you believe, the first thing Will did was to totter over to Jason. He knew Jason was at the bottom of this thing, only since no one had ever hurt him before, he didn't know what "this thing" was. So Will did what he'd always done. He put his arms around Jason and laid his head against his body.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "At that moment, all my Christian conviction went right out the door. *I will buy Will a BB gun for his next birthday*, I thought. *A karate video for toddlers*. It just about killed me, to think how that sweet little child would have to learn to defend himself, but it was either that or eat dust on the playground for the rest of his life."

Taylor concludes: "According to Paul, Will was right and I was wrong. 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil,' Paul wrote to the Romans, 'but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.' What Will did to Jason put an end to the meanness in the room. What I wanted to do to Jason would only have multiplied it. Paul's advice is idealistic, impractical, and dangerous to one's health, but there it is: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'"

So what do you think, people, is this even possible? Paul must have had incredible faith in the power of love. But let's be honest, there are plenty of times when we're not all that keen about putting it into practice. Paul seems to be saying that the real enemy is not the one who pushes us down. No, the real enemy is whatever is inside of us that wants to jump up and push back. We live in a world of playground bullies and bad-tempered coworkers and radical jihadists. It's clearly not possible for us to stomp out all evil. But maybe, with a lot of help from God, we can do our part not to spread it around.

"Bless those who persecute you," says Paul, "bless and do not curse them." And why? Because the moment we curse them, we join them. However satisfying it may feel at the moment, we have still lost. Gandhi once quipped: If everyone demands an eye for an eye, pretty soon the whole world will be blind.

You know, there's nothing warm and fuzzy about any of this. It's certainly not easy. There's no guarantee it will work. Only one thing is certain: if we return evil for evil, evil is all there is, and in an ever increasing amount. The only way to reverse the

spiral, it seems, is to act in totally unexpected ways—blessing those who curse us, returning hatred with kindness, embracing the bully—and hopefully breaking the vicious cycle in the process.

Will it work? I don't know. But let me tell you this: When I got to be a senior at Beresford High School, I was determined to put a stop to the hazing. I wasn't trying to be some sort of white knight riding in on a horse. I was simply remembering the terrible trauma of my sophomore year. I didn't want anyone to have to go through what my classmates and I endured.

One day, a freshman named Ronnie Burns was getting picked on in the school cafeteria. Ronnie was one of those odds kids that seem to always get picked on. Once again, it was mean-spirited juniors who were doing the damage. When I saw what was happening, my blood started to boil. I marched up to those, glared at them, and said, "This has got to stop!" And you know what? It did. That became my mission as a senior in high school: to do whatever I could to stop the cycle of violence, in effect, to overcome evil with good.

"Love your neighbor" is not necessarily a warm feeling between two old friends. Sometimes it shows up in a school cafeteria with a kid you hardly know. At the heart of it, it's an imitation of Jesus. You remember: Jesus took all the hatred, all the meanness, all the wrong, and put it up on the cross. "Father, forgive them," he said. He repaid evil with good, hatred with love, death with life.

It worked once. Can it work again? Maybe. Maybe if Jesus can find any of us willing to give it a try. Amen