

Our Epistle lesson today picks up where last week's lesson left off in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. This is the second part of an appeal Paul is making to a particular early Christian community regarding the Christian life and what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus. The chapter begins with this Greek word that tells us that Paul is making an appeal or an exhortation. He's urging his readers towards something. It's a word we might try to work into our commitment campaign. "I *appeal* to you brothers and sisters..."

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

**Sermon:**

So when I started reading this scripture text, I kept hearing my dad. I'm reading Paul's 2000-year-old letter written in Greek to a church in Rome, why does this sound just like my dad? And then it hits me, my dad is a pro at the seemingly endless lecture, or as Paul called it – the exhortation. My dad's exhortations were primarily leveled at my younger sister and me and when I say my dad was a pro, I don't mean to suggest that his lectures were particularly effective, he was just proficient at *exhorting* them. In Paul's little lecture there are about 23 separate appeals; at 23 my dad would just be winding up. I see in this text, all my dad's different techniques at work.

Jennie, and I got along well enough but we were both good at annoying each other. We would pick on each other until we annoyed our parents enough that we got sent to our rooms.

My dad's default in dealing with this was earnest care mingled with utter confusion and frustration as to why we couldn't just get along. He'd come in and, like Paul, begin to try to reason with us. He'd use logic to hopefully convince us, "Why, yes, our lives would be more harmonious and joyful if we could just play nicely and respect one another's personal space and things."

He'd begin to get exasperated: "Can't you just love another? Can't you just hate what is evil and do what is good?" "Why can't you just play nicely and not annoy your sister?" And when I protested with the inevitable, "But she started it," he'd respond like Paul, "Well you don't have to repay evil for evil. You don't have to hit her back...and, and if at all possible, as far as it depends on you to control your hands, can't you just keep them to yourself!?"

Then he'd offer what seemed to him and any other reasonable person some logical alternatives like they were these great new ideas. "The next time your sister wants to come into your room, why don't you, instead of slamming the door in her face, invite her to play, so she doesn't try to kick a hole in the door?"

"What? Are you kidding?"

"Or let's play a game. Let's see who can do the most nice things for the other."

"Or, or, when she won't stop hitting you, what if you gave her a hug instead and told her how much you love her?" "You know, that would really make her mad. It would be like heaping burning coals on her head."

Yeah right!

And the thing about my dad's lectures, as much as they may have felt like just another form of punishment, that was not his intent. He really wanted us to just experience a harmonious, loving life together and he was utterly befuddled as to why we could not just enjoy that. My dad saw a possible way of living together that we didn't at the time. We were childish; just little kids. I think we get it now, and what a comfort his urging for us continues to be.

That's what Paul is working on here. That Greek word for 'to appeal' or 'to urge,' also means 'to comfort.' Paul wants us to live into the comfort of a community whose love is genuine. What a comfort it would be to live life together in a community where we could trust that the love present is genuine; not hypocritical, not haughty, not jealous, but genuine. Paul is pleading for a community where those who claim to be disciples of Jesus respond to the evil they experience with good – like Jesus. The church is to be the place that demonstrates for the world harmony and grace, where folks rejoice when something good happens for someone else and weep with those who weep.

What if we decided that as a community we would not arm ourselves out of fear of our neighbors, as those who live by fear might encourage, but, out of hope, we would truly commit to feeding the social hungers and thirsts that lead to poverty fueled crimes. In Corinthians Paul, says to the church, "It's time to grow up. It's time to put away the childish ways."

This appeal of the gospel is the same to us who claim to follow Jesus and have received his grace. It's time to grow up. God's already given us all we need to live as the beloved community, on earth as it is in heaven. And what does that look like? Well, Baron mentioned that last week – it looks an awful lot like Jesus. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil and cling to what is good." Jesus modeled it and Paul lay's it out in a Papa Stockstill worthy exhortation – it looks like radical love.

The father of one of our members worshiped with us last week and as he greeted me at the door after worship he gripped my hand and said, "Make sure you tell them next week what a radical Jesus was."

“Yes sir,” I replied. And he looked me square in the eyes and said, “Make sure they *know* he was a radical.” He was a radical y’all; that’s what Paul is driving home. He was such a radical that if we were to truly commit to following him we just might find ourselves living in the harmony Paul is urging us towards – what Jesus called the Kingdom of God among us.

Now, to be sure we face lots of challenges as we attempt to live our lives in obedience to the gospel, but the good news is that God has already given us the grace we need and the Holy Spirit to help us.

So why do things look so broken and bleak so much of the time?

What concerns me is that we are too comfortable living in fear. Sure, there are all kinds of justifications for being afraid almost all of the time. I’m sure they are coming to mind right now. A lot have to do with securing ourselves and loved ones from any hurt that could come. Even at school, we find stuff to be afraid of: failing a class, somebody making fun of us and it spreading around the school like wildfire. But when we make our homes in fear, then we begin to build up defenses that are more violent forms of fear—anger, greed, jealousy and pessimism. From that point, whether you’re at home, at school, at church, in the choir, in youth group, wherever, it becomes a lot harder to contribute to the needs of others and extend hospitality to strangers. I’m concerned we hunkered way down deep into fear and confused our bunkers, literal and otherwise, with the home God has prepared for us in the beloved community.

Paul’s appeal to let love be genuine, his urging to hate what is evil and cling to what is good; his daring us to not avenge ourselves, to associate with the lowly, to bless those who harm us, bless and not curse, to feed our enemies when they are hungry, is, “Yeah right! What are you crazy? That’s a nice ‘Jesusy’ ideal, but in reality it’s just naïve, it’s dumb, that’s not the way the world works.” “No dad, I’m not going to hug my sister when she’s just hit me!”

But, y’all, is this way of being to which the gospel beacons us really that absurd, that naïve? I mean the alternative doesn’t seem to be panning out so well. Have you read the news lately? Have you seen how our postures of fear masked as aggression and bravery and nationalism and economic ambition are tearing apart communities around the world? Paul urges us to boil with the Holy Spirit, but we instead boil with racism that burns through every institution in our nation: from schools, to prisons, to politics, to the streets, to our churches. How’s that worked out? Let’s make sure we put down our white privilege glasses before we answer, church.

Paul urges us to not avenge ourselves, to live peaceably with all, but the leaders of Israel and Palestine and Russia and Texas and ISIS tell us that’s absurd, unrealistic.

Ah, how childish we are, how blind we are to all the radical possibility Jesus sees in our community and us.

I love this story Luke tells about Peter out fishing with Jesus. Peter had been fishing all night and hadn’t caught a thing and Jesus gets in the boat and says, “Let’s go out and put your nets into the deeper water.” Peter’s response is essentially, “That’s a dumb idea, we’ve been fishing all night and haven’t caught a thing, going deeper won’t help.” It’s an absurd suggestion, and yet, *and yet*, even though Peter thinks it’s ridiculous, he obeys and...what happens? They caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to

break. Jesus saw possibility, saw something that Peter simply couldn't even imagine, something he thought was the dumbest idea in the world, *and yet* look what happens.

I feel like this is where we are. I don't know about you but this summer of news has been exhausting and disheartening. We've been given every reason possible to be completely terrified of everything all the time: earthquakes, Ebola, wars, cyber hacking, violence in the streets, being a young black man anywhere, being a woman anywhere. I feel like we've cast about as much as we can in this shallow water of fear and anger and violence, what if we try what Jesus and Paul are urging us towards here? I know it seems ridiculous but what if, as Paul says, "if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, [we] live peaceably with all." Let's just start there, on an individual basis, praying out the fear and inviting in the grace; then maybe at a community level, maybe even at a global level. We'll just hope and see what happens.

The 1997 movie "Life is Beautiful," bears witness to the life that is possible as the most absurd vision of beauty blossoms in the bleakest possible reality. Guido is a Jewish Italian bookshop owner during the rise of the National Fascist Party in the 1940's. Guido is captivated by beauty and love. He seems to continually transform the most mundane experiences into holy moments as well as take the most tragic of situations- like a Nazi concentration camp--and infect them with an alternative that is hopeful and beautiful. On his son, Joshua's 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, they are arrested and taken by cattle car to a concentration camp. From this moment on Guido is committed to preserving hope in his young son and transforms the reality of the death camp into something else, some place where Joshua can maintain his innocence and experience beauty. They've been ripped away from Joshua's mother and are now packed into the barracks with the emaciated and terrified grown men. When a German guard comes in to explain the rules of the camp he asks if anyone speaks German. Guido does not but he raises his hand. The guard begins to shout the oppressive rules in German and in Italian Guido transforms for his petrified son, eyes full of tears, the despair shouted at them into a game. The guard shouts in German and Guido translates, "The game starts now." The guard shouts some more, and Guido translates, "You have to score one thousand points. If you do that, you take home a tank with a big gun." Joshua is captivated; he's giddy with excitement and joy produced by his father in the face of literal hatred. The other prisoners stand confused. As the movie goes on, Guido is faced time and time again with incredible evil and yet he creates a life of beauty for his son in the world of fear and hopelessness. He becomes a demonstration of God's vision for love in the world of hurt.

You tell me what is absurd, what is foolish. A world that accepts as normal this kind of inhumanity, the kind of hurt and oppression we see even today? Or a way of being that hopes for more, one that dares to push out past the shallow water and cast nets into the depth of God's grace? There are those who presume that people of faith only turn to religion out of weakness to make sense of the world or for some opiate. But what takes more strength? I say a life of faith that is not overcome by the evils we have seen, but which overcomes evil with *good*. You tell me what is truly absurd. Turn on the news and then take a look at Jesus in the gospels and you tell me what seems to make more sense. *and yet...* Amen.