

“The Challenge to Respond to Evil with Good”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Labour Day Sunday, September 3, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21

(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

If you are like me, when facing a difficult challenge in life or a major decision, you have friends eager to offer you advice. It may be insightful (or not); it may be welcomed (or not), but advice is offered anyway.

We all have friends like Paul, who sets down some impossible ideas in today's passage. Before I get around to the area I want to highlight – how do we respond to evil with good – let's listen to some of the other items that he stated: “Be joyful in hope; patient in affliction; faithful in prayer.”

And my favourite impossible concept: “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”

Try that for a year – I bet you will have trouble doing that for a week or two. “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”

The best example of how impossible that may be comes to me from a conversation I had this week about shopping carts in parking lots. I remarked that I always take the cart to a gathering area, but almost never take them back to the store, even if the store is closer than the corral in which they may be received in the lot. Why? Well I used to regularly return my cart to the store, and even pick up one or two others resting in the parking lot on the way to the store to be helpful. Then one day someone stopped me in an angry, vitriolic way: “Who do you think you are, some sort of labour hater, union basher and destroyer of jobs for young people?” Now I was not sure which of those was better than the other, so I declined to accept any of those monikers, but wondered where this anger came from as I tried to do a good deed.

“You are taking away jobs from young people by doing what you are doing,” he continued. “If we all returned our carts to the store they could hire less young people and that would be a drain on the job market locally.”

As I say, my behaviour changed, but I am not sure I am necessarily making sure that I am doing what is right in the eyes of everybody.

Try driving 92km in a 90 km zone and see if you are making everyone happy. I wager you are not. Why, driving 82 km in a construction zone marked 70 got me lots of angry gestures and abrupt passing that included cutting me off as they passed last week on Highway 17– there are very few places one can do what makes everyone happy.

But those are not the issues I want to focus on – it is doing good as a response to evil, and not anger and upset or an attempt to “get even.”

One of the great tragedies of the ways that religion is characterized today is that religion upholds certain values and attitudes and will fight to the end to make sure others agree with the religious person. Religion historically has been effective when it is a way of living that has room for tolerance, understanding, acceptance, yes, even love for others.

Jesus taught a certain conviction of faith and attitude, but he always had room for others to hold their own views and beliefs. We should be as magnanimous.

The scourge of residential schools – a legacy some are tired of discussing but the pain demands that we wake up to what took place – is that people felt certain ways of living, thinking, being were to be removed from the Canadian landscape, to the detriment of us all.

Myanmar is facing a refugee crisis of people who follow the traditions of Rohingya Muslims, with roots in Bangladesh and China, being chased from their country for believing that which is opposite the Buddhist majority, another religious mistake for sure that even the Pope has recently condemned. No one should live in terror for their traditional religious beliefs.

The modern image of fighting evil with good is Nelson Mandela, who responded to the scourge of apartheid and his own lengthy imprisonment by leaving prison and leading his country into a new century – peacefully, courageously, confidently. He did not do as people expected – lead an armed revolution. He governed peaceably, and even stood in front of the 1995 world cup of Rugby cheering on the all white team of Afrikaners from South Africa to victory – a stand that angered his African National Congress allies and yet won over a nation. François Pienaar, captain of that winning team, said he grew up hating Mandela, and was taught what a despicable person he was, yet through that experience of the world cup and shaking Mandela's hand when they won, Pienaar was transformed, and so was the nation. Pienaar invited the President to his wedding and named him godfather of his two sons. Good can come out of evil.

The Alliance for Middle East Peace is a group of peace activist groups that seek reconciliation in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians, between Jews and Muslims. The impetus for the group has come from many parents who have lost children in the ongoing and seemingly endless battles in the Middle East, who believe that it is time to seek peace and cooperation and not war. They believe that good can come from evil.

Why, even the sacrament of communion that we celebrate this day is a symbol of turning evil into good. The vicious and brutal crucifixion of Jesus was the precursor of his followers taking that destructive act and turning it into a time of honouring his life, and remembering his example.

Would we have communion without Jesus' brutal death? That is speculation I cannot determine, but one thing is certain: the evil of that death and crucifixion is made good in the call for personal wholeness and fulfillment in the sacrament of communion.

We have examples of turning evil into good. Let us remember them, celebrate them, and learn from them as we gather around this, the Lord's Table.