“Bring on the Burning Coals!”

13th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 3, 2017, Year A

Romans 12:9-13

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I remember when my father died seven years ago August. My siblings were scattered all over New England and it took time for us all to pack, give notices at work, and get up to Maine where Dad had lived. My brother would have none of this delay. He called up the sisters who were late in arriving and read them the riot act about not being there to help with planning the funeral and reception. Sisters-in-law tried to fill the gap, but when the blood relatives arrived, all offers of help were refused, and turf wars ensued. I wanted to lead the funeral service, but my clergy friends said, no, this was the time for me to be the daughter and not the pastor.

Grief brings up all kinds of emotions in us. First we feel shock and disbelief that our loved one has died. Then we get angry, angry that God allowed them to suffer and then die. We look around for an available target – because of course we can’t be angry at God, can we? – and we zero in on an innocent bystander. It could be anybody – a sibling, the funeral home director, or often, the pastor.

I guess Paul’s letter to the Romans could have come in handy for me and my family in our time of grief. Paul teaches that misdirected anger is not healthy for ourselves, our families or our community. Love is a central Christian teaching. There is really no other lesson we should take away from Jesus’ words than “love God and love one another.”

But, isn’t that really too hard sometimes? Don’t people just really tick us off? Why can’t they be perfect, like we are? Why don’t they do just as we would have done in that circumstance? And why don’t we just talk about them behind their back with our friends and *really* let them have it?

In my spiritual travels this summer, I learned that many of the world’s religious traditions teach a similar tenet: that we must work to improve ourselves to gain a more positive picture of the world, before we can enter the world to do good and healthy ministry. Paul’s teaching gives us a guide on how to do this.

“Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”

“Honor one another above ourselves.”

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil.”

“Do not be conceited (or self-righteous).”

“Do not take revenge; that is God’s right, not ours.”

Paul tells us the best way to get back at our enemy and accuser is to smother them with love. Paul describes this more graphically, when he quotes Proverbs 25:

“If your enemy is hungry, feed them;  
    if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.  
In doing this, you will *heap burning coals on their head*.” (Prov. 25:21-22)

Well, ouch. Forgiving someone their trespasses against us does not immediately bring to mind heaping burning coals on their head. Although we do have the expression, “Kill them with kindness,” which might help us understand the burning coals thing.

Jesus said, “If someone slaps your cheek, turn and offer them the other one. If someone takes your cloak, give them your shirt, too. If someone forces you to march one mile, march two….Love your neighbor and pray for those who persecute you.” (Mt 5:39-44)

This philosophy of non-violence is counter-intuitive. One of our basic instincts is to defend ourselves. We stand ready at any hint of aggression to immediately fight fire with fire. We are on high alert to strike, sometimes preemptively, just in case anyone was even thinking of crossing us.

But Christianity teaches us quite the opposite. We are to repay evil with love. It’s a wonder with a philosophy like that, Christians weren’t all wiped out really soon after we started this movement. But some *one*, some *force*, some *feeling* – God, the Holy Spirit, the memory of Jesus – kept us going and kept us growing. This counter-cultural way of thinking caught on like wildfire around the world. Pretty soon it became the dominant culture, and there is where we started to stray from the original path of love. Now that Christians are in power, we can force our beliefs and practices on other, vulnerable minority religions.

But that power play has not served us well. We may believe our religion trumps others, but I don’t believe God sees us that way. If we *practice* what Jesus taught us – and the Apostle Paul reiterates – then we may have a religion that really works.

Do we realize what holding anger and grudges within us does to our physical health? It increases blood pressure, puts extra strain on our hearts, causes headaches and even jaw aches from our clenched teeth. Can’t we come up with a better response to perceived hurt than to try to hurt right back?

Try this. Let’s close our eyes. Imagine in our minds someone who has really ticked us off. I mean, someone whom we like to just read the riot act to. How does our body feel? Temperature going up? Face tightening? Heart racing? Mind burning? Doesn’t feel so good, does it?

Now try this. Imagine holding out an empty gift box to this person. The box is not filled with any solution to this healing, but simply contains an empty space, open to what God may place there. Feel the change that may be happening inside the box. Feel the power of the Holy Spirit churning around inside the box, making her plans for what is to come. Now imagine the other person accepting the box. In the moment both of your hands are holding the box, imagine an electric feeling of warmth coursing throughout both of you. This energy connects both of you for a brief moment - two become one. The relationship is complete, even for just one moment, but at least it is a start.

The work of Christian reconciliation is hard. We don’t want to give us. Our egos want us to win. Yet, can our world survive if we don’t practice what we preach? Aren’t we better off treating our fellow human beings – and our bodies, minds and blood pressure – with compassion rather than vindictiveness?

Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes in his book Living Buddha, Living Christ, that unmindful (or thoughtless) speech can kill. He shares one of the main precepts of Buddhism which says:

“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve them of their suffering.

“Knowing words can create unhappiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure.

“I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”

As we learned from our short meditation this morning, it’s not only words that can kill, but our dark thoughts can, too. They can kill our spirit and our soul. The best way to resolve conflict is to heap compassion and understanding upon one another when tensions are high. This is really the only way to save our relationships, our health and the health of our planet. So, bring on the burning coals, and let them fire us up with forgiveness, peace, and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

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