

"Our Values"

Romans 12: 9-21

31 August 2008

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

Romans 12: 9-21

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.

Prayer.

In our epistle for today, the apostle Paul rightly responds to the work and words of Jesus as found in the gospels. Paul's words are an echo to the Sermon on the Mount, the beatitudes, the large and expansive texts when Jesus prepares his followers for his eventual absence. In short, Paul, today, is staking the claim for a more greatly defined Christian ethic and morality. These are our values.

The Law could only take us so far. The Law defined the playing field within which the faithful know they can act with a reliable assurance that their behavior is righteous. But Jesus brought the faithful so much further. Kill your neighbor; that is outside the fence, and deemed, unrighteous. Treat your neighbor poorly, or with disrespect, in public; and one was still inside the Law.

Jesus leaves the old Jewish Law in place; but he spends a lifetime of ministry talking about what life inside the playing field should look like. Much inside the field needed to be done. What about the last, the lost, the least? Jesus reached out to them, much to the chagrin of the Jewish authorities. What about the diseased, the unclean, the blind, and the lame? Jesus cured their disease, made them clean, gave them sight, and made them walk; sometime even on the Sabbath! That wasn't work; those were acts of God!

Paul, today, makes a summary response to the gospels for the benefit of his church in Rome, and for the benefit of the Church (with a capital "C") for all time. We best pay attention; for his words certainly can solve many of the problems we collectively face, and could go a long way for our personal self-improvement.

"Let love be genuine," Paul begins. Each of us believes we are experts in being able to read the intent of others. But Paul is speaking of the self. Make my motives pure. Make your motives pure. Let the only motive be love.

This may sound simple, but, in practice, it is very hard to do. It is hard to weed out competing temptations. "What can you do for me?" invades our thinking as soon as we reach out in love to another. The love of Christ can expect no reward, because we don't own it. We merely pass it on. The only reward is knowing that the relationship is strengthened between the person who is loved and our God. When that is made strong, the affection will become mutual.

Hate evil. It is the only thing that Christians are allowed to hate. Evil is anything that separates us from God, and its byproduct is sin. Raise the outstretched arm with shouts of "hail" to Hitler (or any other despot), and not to God, and people are exterminated because of their bloodlines, skin color, or beliefs. Murder, rape, steal or plunder ... and power, authority, and wealth become the idol that replaces God. Crush people, simply because you can, and you separate yourself from God.

Evil is an intoxicating drink, which once tasted, plants the seeds of addiction and dependency, which never go away. It becomes the chronic illness, that, at best, can be managed, but at worst, can never be satisfied until it kills the host.

Instead, hold fast to what is good, Paul tells us. This is what is good: being so concerned, so involved, so immersed in the work of the Spirit and the lives of others, that needs can be anticipated long before they present, and those needs can be addressed, long before they spin out of control into problems.

People have a need to be treated with respect; so it is good to show them honor. People need to be treated with fairness and equality; so do not be haughty, as if you are better, more deserving, or smarter than you are.

People have a need for the basics of life: food, shelter, and clothing. So, if it is at all possible to extend a helping hand to those without food, shelter, or clothing ... to meet their needs, the world will be in a much better place.

People have a need for peace; to be left in peace, and to live in peace with neighbors. Make the Christian life permeate with peacemaking, building bridges, creating solutions, and finding answers so that we can all live in peace together.

Practice hospitality, the apostle Paul teaches us. I speak about hospitality in my "Final Thoughts" section of "This Week at Zion."¹ It is a primary concern of Bishop Robert Schnase in his book ***Five Practices of a Fruitful Congregation***.² Bishop Schnase describes radical hospitality as hospitality that exceeds expectations and goes the second mile. It means we offer the absolute utmost of our abilities, our creativity, and ourselves in offering the gracious invitation and welcome of Christ to others. In a world that encourages competition for the title of "Number 1" this is a radical invitation to claim the second spot as our own. It takes a strong and confident Christian to routinely place the needs of others before the self. Take the me, mine, my, and I out of every occasion, and humbly ask, what can be done for you?

Paul makes special effort to single out those who do us evil. It is a sad reality: we can't force people to behave. We live in a dangerous world, and it has been this way since the fall in the Garden of Eden. There are others who would do us harm, just because they can; shoot us down or bludgeon us with a rock, just as Cain did to Abel. There are those in this world who will knock us down, beat us up, steal our last dime, leaving us in the ditch half dead, and spit on our body as they skip away whistling a happy tune.

We cannot overcome evil with evil. Killing others who kill us leaves us with a planet filled with graves and populate with murderers. Suicide bombers that are met with bombs that fall from fighters and bombers only breed more suicide bombers. Violence begets violence. Injustice voids the peace. Oppression stokes the fire of revenge. We see it clearly when it comes to us, when we are the victims. It becomes hazy and a lot more unclear when it is done by us, or on our behalf, in retaliation towards others.

Jesus, and Paul, tells us a better way: to overcome evil with good.

The strong show strength when using restraint, in dealing with their enemies. Compassion towards those who would hate and hurt you will always result in a better outcome, than overwhelming force with even more force. Didn't we learn about this on the play ground in elementary school? Haven't we heard this after decades of Sunday school and worship?

When politicians promise us that they are getting tough on crime, what they really mean is that they are coming down heavy on punishment. They aren't working on ways of overcoming evil with good, like eliminating the conditions that breeds crime and violence – poverty, discrimination, injustice, oppression, unemployment, lousy education, and barriers to health care and services.

¹ <http://www.geocities.com/kittycatalien/Zion/goodmorning.htm>

² This book may be ordered for \$7.00 from Cokesbury at the following site:
<http://www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=687442>

Overcoming evil with good isn't a liberal agenda. It isn't democratic or republican. It's not conservative, socialist, or anything else, for that matter. Overcoming evil with good is Christian. It is our belief, because it is Christ's belief. It is our value, because it is Christ's value.

If you want to get ahead in this world, don't hang around the Tricky Dick or the Bubba Bill, for power ultimately corrupts. Oh, I know, the promises made at political conventions; they are as smooth and as slimy as snakes hiding in the grass.

Instead hang around with those who need you most; people like those Jesus associated with. Make yourself the one who reaches out to the stranger, and make them your friend. Be the spinner of harmony and the practitioner of peace. Associate with the lowly and ease their suffering, give them hope, and lift them up.

Dearly beloved, friends, family, and neighbors: listen to, and heed these words of Paul. They endure, not because of his eloquence or stature. They endure beyond the centuries and across cultures because these words convey the values of Christ. These are the values of the Christian. Make them your values, even as I pledge to make them mine. Amen.

"Our Values"

Romans 12: 9-21

31 August 2008

© The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)