

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2020
Romans 12:9-21

Beloved: grace, mercy and peace be yours and mine from God and our savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Three years ago, this last month, I was on my way to Charlottesville, Virginia, at the invitation of a colleague, to be a part of a gathering of faith leaders to stand with students and citizens in counter-protest to a gathering of White Supremacists. To be honest, I was expecting to check-in to the Hampton Inn, enjoy my hot breakfast, walk behind the student and citizen organizers to provide support, if I'm being totally honest – have my picture taken, and then go home.

But, of course, that's not what happened. From the moment I arrived, there was a heavy atmosphere. I found myself checking into the hotel surrounded by folks with swastika tatoos and t-shirts; and later I was part of a group that was literally surrounded, by white supremacists carrying torches, in a church where we gathered for prayer and encouragement before the next days events would unfold. The atmosphere turned to terror as police herded us back into the church when tear gas and bottles were flying at the first folks who left the church, my blood was chilled by the experience of being accompanied back to my car by an officer, as she said, "for your own safety, reverend."

The next day, as you well know, violence erupted in the midst of protest and counter protest, culminating in a White Supremacist ramming his car into a group of people killing a 32-year-old woman and injuring 19 others. I still hear the screams of that event, of which I was a few blocks away, the blood-curdling screams of those trapped, in an instant, under heavy burden of white supremacy gone wild, unchecked racism gone public.

In that moment, I knew. I knew that it was time. Time for the church to take a stand against violence. Time for us to claim the truth that racism is sin. To be challenged past our well-meaning thoughts and heart-felt prayers toward some sacrifice of ourselves to act out of love for God and neighbor. It was high time for the church to rise up to our high and holy calling, showing the world, the political establishment a new and better way, surprising even ourselves as we count the cost of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

In our lesson today from Romans, Paul talks realistically about the world we live in. He asks, in essence, what should Christians do, living in a world of sin, but desiring to be reconciled with God, and to the better, abundant life God has promises us in Jesus Christ?

I think, like the people of that time, we answer that challenge with pious platitudes about obeying the law or insipid pledges to try to be a better person. But sin is too strong for these solutions. We have been following the law, and we have been trying to be better people. But sin still seems to have the last word, the world going to hell in a handbasket and our lives not nearly measuring to even what they used to be. What are we to do?

Paul's answer is that our hope is for God to mercifully intervene. God does the work of reconciling us to God and us to one another. God must act, Paul insists, and God did: in Jesus Christ, God has reconciled all people to Godself. In Jesus Christ, God has freed us from slavery to sin. In Jesus Christ, God forgives us and restores us to new life.

And that God has graciously done all of this for us, what then should be our response? Out of gratitude, we gather to worship and praise God, to be strengthened by God's Word and at God's Table, to go out from here – together – to love and serve a world that desperately cries out for hope. Indeed, we are scattered to be the Church, worshipping God and sharing Christ with our minds, our hands, and our hearts for the sake of this world God still so loves.

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

That's what we start to look like when we respond to that gracious gift of God's love given us in Jesus Christ. We love genuinely. We name evil for evil, and we hold fast to what is good – even when it's just as easy to do what “everyone else” is doing.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

When I was in Charlottesville, I was on three teams over the course of those two days. On one team, I marched behind local religious leaders, in solidarity with them; on another, I “stood watch” outside a prayer vigil to guard the safety of those inside that circle and to summon the police if they were needed. While I was keeping watch, I met each person who came close, no matter what side I thought they might be on, looking them straight in the eye and offering them the respect and dignity that befits another child of God. That was soul crushing, as I was privy to seeing evil run rampant in people old and young, often cloaked in the language that you and I share as people of faith. For God's sake, the white supremacists marched behind a processional cross, obviously borrowed, from a church. The third team I was on, and my last assignment in Charlottesville, was a team that provided respite, cold water, snacks, basic medical care and decontamination showers for those who had been tear gassed. That humanitarian work, led by the faith community of Charlottesville, did not discriminate against any who had need – no matter the banner or sign they carried. It was, in the parking lot of Charlottesville First United Methodist Church, a sign of the kin-dom of God come near as we were the hands of Christ for any who had need, and more challenging still, as we recognized Christ come to us by those drowning in the sin and filth of white supremacy and violent racism. It was harrowing and humbling, lives were changed, lives were saved. Thoughts and prayers gave way to action, and the church was rekindled; I know, because I was, too.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the

Lord.”²⁰No, “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.”²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Beloved, Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. In Jesus’ name. Amen.