

“A Message We Struggle to Hear”
Romans 12:9-21
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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About this time sixteen years ago, every church I know of in this country was packed. In the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, people discovered a new level of interest in matters of faith. Who were these people? What did they believe? Where was God in all of this? What should we, as Christians, do? The interest didn't last. We have a short attention span as a culture. Whether we're talking about terrorist acts, racial tensions, gun violence or natural disasters, we are invested in the moment, but our attention quickly moves on to other things.

But for the moment, people were interested in matters of faith, and all of us who stood behind a pulpit had an opportunity for leadership. Like every other preacher, I labored over what to preach that first Sunday after 9-11, but then I decided to invite the chair of the religion department at Wake Forest University; a church member, friend and comparative religion scholar who had lived in Egypt for a number of years; to preach. My voice would be heard many other times and places, including a prayer service we had on September 12. But on that first Sunday, I wanted people to hear from the most informed person I knew.

Charles Kimball preached a sermon that focused on moving beyond “us and them” categories of thinking. While providing accurate information on Islam and details about terrorists, he tried to persuade us to recognize the humanity in all people. While acknowledging the feelings of anger, fear and sadness all felt at the time, he pointed to nobler responses called for in Christian tradition. He talked about loving the enemy, welcoming the stranger, not repaying evil for evil.

It was a message some struggled to hear. Many wanted sharper lines of distinction drawn, clearer words of vengeance spoken, an angrier sort of patriotism expressed. But somewhere deep down, the vast majority of us knew this was the message we needed to hear in this moment, whether we wanted to hear it or not.

It was a message rooted in the text we have read today from Romans 12 wherein the Apostle Paul says things like, “Let love be genuine... extend hospitality to strangers... bless those who persecute you... do not repay anyone evil for evil... never avenge yourselves... 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.”

We might argue that while this may be a noble message - it comes from the Bible - it was not the message to preach right after 9-11 when the nation had experienced harm by an enemy. But consider the context in which Paul writes these words, a context of persecution for the church at the hands of a more powerful enemy called Rome, not to mention the rejection of fellow Jews who do not embrace Jesus as Messiah. It is not an easy time for Christians in Rome to hear this message.

Consider what Peter says to Jesus in today’s reading from Matthew. This is the same Peter who has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah and thus been praised by Jesus. But as soon as Jesus says he will not raise up armies to defeat the Romans, but rather will undergo great suffering, be killed and then be raised on the third day, Peter says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

Jesus brings a different way of overcoming evil, the way of sacrifice and self-giving. It is not just the way he chooses for himself, but the way he chooses for his followers as he makes clear in this reading from Matthew and Paul makes clear to the church at Rome. But it is not an easy message for people to hear at this time. There is much resistance to the message and Jesus himself, not just by his critics, but by closest followers as well.

But then, there is much resistance to Jesus to this day, even within his church. There is never an easy time for us to hear this message of sacrificial love. And the challenge applies not just to how we relate to national enemies like ISIS and North Korea, and ideological enemies like white supremacists and the other political party, but to the more personal enemies we interact with every day - the co-worker who undercuts us, the family member who makes our life you know what, the neighbor who sues us, the classmate who organizes the network of

friends against us. Bless those who persecute us? Not seek to avenge ourselves? Extend kindness to them? It almost feels like we are cooperating with evil, empowering dysfunction, enabling codependence.

A lay leader of another church I served attended a leadership conference years ago. One small group session was on codependence. The leader, a clinician, defined the term and described how it works. She then asked the group for examples and people named the usual array of subjects which she wrote on a board. Finally, our leader raised his hand and gave an unexpected example of codependence. “The church,” he said. In fine clinical form, the leader of the session said, “Tell me more about what you mean.” So, he went on to describe ways in which churches sometimes confuse kindness with codependence, enabling unhealthy pursuits of power, control and many other things. When he had finished, she walked to the board and wrote, “The church.”

It is easy to confuse kindness with codependence, especially when trying to embrace teachings like we find in Romans 12. “Kill them with kindness” is the simplistic reduction of these teachings, but does it kill them or make them stronger, does it resolve the animosity or make it worse, whether we are talking about North Korea, white supremacists or a dysfunctional family member?

But all of this having been said, what is the alternative to what Jesus and Paul propose? How have other methods worked with terrorist groups, Neo-Nazis and people we know? If we cannot eliminate the enemy and don’t even want to in some cases (One hopes this is not our wish for the aunt or uncle with mental health issues!), then we need an approach that is designed to resolve the differences between us, not overwhelm the other. And if our methods are no different than those we oppose, what do we achieve even if we do overwhelm them?

Even the key characters in *Game of Thrones* understand these basic realities. There is an episode in the most recent season wherein Daenerys contemplates using her dragons, fire-breathing dragons, weapons of mass destruction, against her enemy’s home base where many civilians live. John Snow, the King of the North, a potential ally at this point, insists that if she does, she will be no different than the evil

she opposes. She is a queen who has sought justice in many ways, freed slaves from their masters, been nobler than her enemies and certainly the enemy she confronts now. She dreams of a better world, but can she shape this world if she uses the methods of the evil she opposes?

She knows she can't and we know we can't simply return evil for evil and ever get anywhere better, but this path of sacrifice and self-giving love is tough. Can anyone really follow it? Does anyone?

On an individual level, I think of Chaouki Boulos, who serves through CBF with his wife Maha in their native Lebanon. They preached from this pulpit several years ago as a part of our Global Missions Offering emphasis. Chaouki's father, as you may recall, was shot and killed by a Syrian soldier when Chaouki was a teenager. We can only begin to imagine the anger he felt toward that soldier and all Syrians. Today he spends much of his time ministering to Syrian refugees fleeing the violence in their land. He is not seeking to avenge himself. He is not returning evil for evil. Transformed by the love of God revealed in Jesus the Christ, he is overcoming evil with good.

I also think of Civil Rights activist Will Campbell spending a year with Ku Klux Klansmen, drinking bourbon with them and trying to understand them and connect with them as human beings (referenced in *Brother to a Dragonfly* and personal conversations). Will never condoned racism, but he wanted to love his enemy. He wanted to humanize the evil other. He wanted to overcome evil with good. This meant seeking out the Klan. I knew Will, I don't know how he did it, but I know why and understand the motivation.

On a national level, I think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa through which people whose loved ones were tortured, imprisoned and killed somehow come to forgive those who did such evil things. Truth is part of the work, those who have done wrong acknowledge their wrongdoing and change their behavior, which are important steps in avoiding codependence. But the wounded forgive and reconciliation is experienced. How can this happen? Desmond Tutu says it is because many follow a rabbi who when he was crucified, said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Then, he adds this insightful comment. “It is clear that if we only look to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future (*The Sunflower*, p. 268).” Indeed, without forgiveness, there is no future in any conflict. There is a deep kind of woundedness that afflicts all parties, endless cycles of revenge, no genuine peace for anyone even if one party “wins” the fight.

On a national level, I also think of work the group “Life after Hate” is doing, helping people get out of white supremacist groups. I heard a fascinating interview this week with co-founder Christian Picciolini, a former skinhead. There were some frightening insights where he talked about the newer strategies of supremacists, preying upon vulnerable young people and then teaching them to blend in to society, look normal. But there were some encouraging moments when he talked about how he got out of this movement and what he does now.

He got into the skinhead movement not because of ideology, but because he was struggling with his direction in life. His journey out began when he opened a record store. About 75% of his business appealed to white supremacists, but about 25% appealed to other constituencies, including lovers of Hip Hop. So, African-Americans, Jews and gay people came into his store, and rather than shouting at him in anger, they extended compassion. Over time, it got to him. They did kill him, or the hatred in him, with kindness. And in the end, he not only changed, he became a change agent for others, helping struggling souls manipulated by hate groups to get out and find a way to a healthier life.

Notice the strategy that changed Christian Picciolini, a strategy he now uses. It is not about seeking vengeance, getting even, attacking in anger those who have done harm. It’s about seeking to understand them, connect with them, overcome evil with good. There is no pretense about the nature of evil itself. Racism is an ugly thing, religious bigotry goes against the very nature of authentic faith, demeaning people for who they are is evil. There is simply a desire to see people overcome by evil as human beings, children of God, and help them.

“The tragedy is not that things are broken,” says Msimangu, in Alan Patton’s novel about brokenness and healing in the South Africa,

Cry, The Beloved Country, “The tragedy is that they are not mended again.” Truer words have never been spoken. The tragedy is not that family members have conflict. The tragedy is that we often go to our graves without reconciling. The tragedy is not that we have experienced racial division in this nation since our beginning, though this is sad. The tragedy is that we cannot seem to experience healing at a deep enough level to move on together as brothers and sisters. The tragedy is not that there is evil in the world. The tragedy is that we cannot seem to take the simple advice that both our Lord and one of his earliest and best-known followers have given us - that it is futile trying to overcome evil with evil; the only solution is to overcome evil with good.

Many of you are familiar with Burning Coal Theatre. It is the theatre that wrote and performed a play about our history as a church during our 200th anniversary. It is the theatre I performed at with Lexi from Temple Beth Or. It is a small community theatre with a particular interest in justice. What you may not know is how Burning Coal got its name. Founder Jerome Davis, Jerry to those who know him, spoke at our church on a Wednesday night and told the story behind the name. It is linked to our reading from Romans 12, the reference to heaping burning coals on our enemies’ heads by extending kindness. The theatre’s concern is not just justice, but a specific kind of justice, Jesus’ kind.

Now, we are not going to change the name of our church. And we would not want to steal the idea from Jerry anyway. But we could think of ourselves as Burning Coal Baptist Church. For we are or at least aspire to be the kind of Baptists who care about a very specific kind of justice, the kind that seeks to bless those who persecute us, live peaceably with all and overcome evil with good. It is not an easy message to hear or any easy path to follow, but deep down we do want to hear and follow. God help us to do so!