



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

Overcome evil with good – even when it doesn't seem to work

Sermon for Sunday, August 30, 2020 (13th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 17A, Track 2)

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"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Paul concludes chapter 12 of Romans, a set of instructions for how to live together in Christian community, with this exhortation: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Or, as the Common English Bible translates it, "Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good."

I'm reminded of the famous words of Martin Luther King, Jr. – **"Darkness cannot drive out darkness - only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate - only love can do that."**

A well-read interfaith leader, Martin Luther King was paraphrasing the words of the Buddha from many centuries before him. In verse 5 of the Dhammapada, a collection of sayings of the Buddha, **"Hatred does not cease through hatred at any time. Hatred ceases through love. This is an unalterable law."** He was also, of course, referring to Jesus's call to love one's enemies from his own Christian tradition.

This is probably one of the hardest spiritual teachings there is, because it goes against all our natural instincts. When we are harmed, we are biologically wired to either harm back or run away – in order to preserve our own life. To respond with good when someone has done evil to us is not a "safe" move – it makes us more vulnerable and further endangers us, something that our amygdala, that "reptilian" part of our brain that controls our "fight or flight" response, is always desperately trying to avoid.

But despite our biological hardwiring, wise spiritual teachers have always recognized that **violence and hatred, when indulged, only reproduce themselves in a vicious cycle. The only way out is through choosing to love instead of hate.**

This does not mean feeling emotionally positive feelings towards those who have hurt us, which may very well be impossible in some cases. The English language has only one word for "love," which limits our ability to speak of it with nuance.

In New Testament Greek there are several words for love: *eros*, which refers to romantic, sexual love; *philia*, which refers to affectionate regard or friendship; and *agape*, which refers to love that seeks the best for another. *Agape* is present in parent-child relationships and in spousal relationships and in friendships, but one need not "*eros*" or "*philia*" someone in order to "*agape*" them. In other words, you need not like someone in order to love them in the *agape* sense of wishing them well. It is the word "*agape*" that is used to refer to God's love for humanity, and for how we are called to love others in a spiritual sense.

Paul's teaching in Romans 12 is about the dangers of getting caught up in cycles of hurt and revenge, of arrogance and pride, of thinking of ourselves as better than others. He challenges the Romans to direct their competitive energies into "showing honor" to one another rather than in tearing one another down. If you're going to compete with each other, he seems to be saying, compete over who can do the most good. (The Salvation Army seems to have taken this passage to heart with their motto: "doing the most good"!) Rather than lashing back with hurtful words when someone hurts you, bless them instead – wish them well. Defeat evil with good.

Sometimes this works, even in the effects we see in this world. Although it is a fictional tale, the story of Jean Valjean from the classic French novel *Les Misérables* illustrates how evil can be defeated with good.

The story begins with Jean Valjean being released from prison after serving 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family. He has become cynical, hardened, and trusts no one. He has nothing to his name and is let out on the streets with no resources and nowhere to turn for help. As he goes door to door begging, he happens to knock on the local bishop's door. The bishop takes him in and feeds him and gives him a place to stay. That night, Valjean sneaks out in the middle of the night, stealing the silver place settings from the table.

When he is caught and the police drag him to the bishop's door, they tell the bishop that Valjean has told them that the bishop gave him the silver. The bishop surprises everyone, Valjean most of all, when he confirms Valjean's story. "That is right," he tells the police. In the poetic wording of the stage play, he responds, "But my friend, you left so early / surely something slipped your mind / You forgot I gave these also / Would you leave the best behind?" – and proceeds to give Valjean the two silver candlesticks from his fireplace mantle.

The bishop took a risk by following Jesus's teachings in Matthew 5:39-40: "Do not resist an evildoer... if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." Valjean could have betrayed his trust once again after this incident, or gone on to do harm to others as well. **The bishop had no way of knowing what the outcome would be, but he chose to repay evil with good.**

As the story goes, **that risky act of generosity by the bishop transforms Valjean.** His hardened shell falls away and reveals a kind, tender man with a heart of compassion, who goes about doing good for the rest of his life. The bishop's act of kindness and forgiveness overcomes Valjean's evil act of stealing.

It doesn't always work out that way, though. In the film *Peaceful Warrior*, about the life of gymnast Dan Millman, there is a scene in which Dan and his mentor, who he nicknames "Socrates" because of his penchant for spouting off pithy philosophical sayings, are walking home at night when they are stopped by a man who demands their wallets at gunpoint. They hand them over, shakily, and the man starts to walk away.

"Wait," Socrates calls after him, "aren't you going to take our watches, too?"

"What?!" Dan yelps, looking at Socrates like he's crazy.

The man with the gun looks at him like he's crazy, too, and tries to figure out what the "catch" is here. Socrates takes off his watch and holds it out to the man. "Go on, take it," he says.

The man looks at him warily, suspiciously, but comes back over and takes the watch.

"Give him yours too," Socrates tells Dan.

Dan begrudgingly complies, all the while looking indignant and completely exasperated at Socrates' behavior.

The scene cuts to an image of Dan and Socrates walking down the road alone in their underwear – the implication being, of course, that Socrates insisted that they give everything they had, including the clothes on their backs, to this man who robbed them.

Unlike Jean Valjean, this man obviously didn't have a change of heart, and the only thing that came out of the exchange was that Dan and Socrates lost all their stuff and wound up in the embarrassing position of walking down the road in their underwear.

"What did you do that for?!" Dan fumes at Socrates

Socrates is always using real-world events to teach Dan philosophical truths. This time is no different.

"The ones who are the hardest to love are usually the ones who need it the most," Socrates responds.

"Overcoming evil with good" might not always seem to work in terms of the results we see in this life. Obviously, playing mind games with an armed robber is a dangerous thing to do, and it could have gotten Socrates and Dan killed – but **Jesus's call to love is not a call to safety and security. It is a call to a risky kind of love that has the potential to cost us our lives, as it cost him his.**

In the words of today's Gospel reading: "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them."

By all outward appearances, Socrates' decision to voluntarily give everything he and Dan had to someone who robbed them was foolish. But the deeper lesson Socrates was able to teach Dan in that moment – not only about loving those who are hardest to love, but about not being attached to material things – was worth far more than the price of their clothes – or their egos. And who knows what effect their reckless act of self-sacrifice might have on the man who robbed them later, long after their paths had diverged?

Even when it might seem like evil has won, when you try to overcome evil with good and you wind up walking down the street in your underwear, remember that what you see is not the end of the story. The powers of evil seemed to have won when Jesus was crucified, but Jesus's Resurrection is the ultimate proof that good can and does overcome evil, every time. Living in the full conviction of that truth may make you look foolish in the world's eyes at times, but in that worldly humiliation, you will find the true life that Jesus speaks of – that

abundant spiritual life that is available to us when we let go of anger, hatred and revenge and choose to overcome evil with good.