

**Pentecost 16 - Year A**  
**31 August 2008**  
**Saint Anne's Episcopal Church**  
**Lee's Summit, Missouri**

**Romans 12:9-21**

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.*

In this political season, perhaps some of you had the opportunity to see Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California and author of the best-selling book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, interview John McCain and Barack Obama at the Saddleback Civil Forum on Leadership and Compassion on August 16<sup>th</sup>.

Rick Warren and the folks at Saddleback Church established the Civil Forum to promote civil discourse and the common good of all. And, at the Forum earlier this month, Pastor Warren asked the two presidential candidates – one on one with each of them individually - questions about their faith, their values, their leadership styles, and how they make decisions.

I found these to be fascinating conversations, with a number of very interesting and enlightening questions.

One of the questions that Pastor Warren asked both of the candidates that evening was the following.

***Does evil exist? And if it does, do we ignore it? Do we negotiate with it? Do we contain it? Do we defeat it?***

Now, given the nature of politics, I'm sure some people liked Senator Obama's answer to those questions better and I'm sure some people liked Senator McCain's answer better. And, since it is politics, I'm sure some people didn't like either of their answers.

But whatever you thought about the answers given by these two politicians who are candidates for the highest office in our land, today we have heard the apostle Paul's answer to Pastor Warren's questions. And, Paul's answer was very clear.

***Does evil exist?***

I think we can all agree that Paul gave an emphatic “yes” to this question.

Paul had absolutely no doubt in his mind about the existence of evil when he wrote, “Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good.”

*And so, Paul, if evil does exist, do we ignore it? Do we negotiate with it?*

*Do we contain it? Do we defeat it?*

Paul told us, as Christians, clearly what he thought we should do about evil.

Not ignore it. Not contain it. Not negotiate with it. Not even defeat it. No, here is what Paul said the Christian response to evil should be.

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

Paul’s words about how to deal with evil come in a portion of scripture that we began reading last week – the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

In the first 11 chapters of the Letter, Paul had written eloquently regarding his belief about God’s unbounded grace, mercy, and salvation for all. And, now in Chapter 12 he has moved to a series of exhortations – instructions, if

you will - regarding how this belief should play itself out in the daily lives of Christians.

The portion of the Letter we have read today details for us what the apostle Paul meant when he told us that our lives as Christians should be a living sacrifice, presented in devotion and gratitude to a gracious and generous God. Here, in these instructions, Paul has described the marks of the true Christian – a description of what a living sacrifice looks like.

But, how in the world can we overcome evil with good? In a world where evil does exist? In a world where those who oppose God and God's will for creation are all too evident? In a world where being a Christian and trying to overcome evil with good can sound like building a strategy based on using a pea shooter to attack an aircraft carrier?

Well, Paul gave us the tactics to implement this strategy of overcoming evil with good.

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of**

**all...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.**

I don’t know about you, but the tactics Paul has laid out here are difficult to swallow. Frankly, these instructions can sound pretty impractical and more than a little foolish. They can sound like pie-in-the-sky idealism. A way to assure that evil will win and those who practice this kind of idealism will get stomped in our dog eat dog world.

But, wait a minute haven’t we heard this sort of advice from another teacher?

**Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.**

**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.**

Now, I don't have to tell you who the teacher was that gave these instructions. You know it was Jesus. Our example for the behavior Paul described in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans is Jesus.

We can dismiss what Paul has said, and we can even dismiss what Jesus has said, as pie-in-the-sky idealism, impractical, even foolish. We can dismiss it and say it just won't work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not in the world we live in.

And, as we dismiss these teachings, these instructions, we can even rationalize that Jesus and Paul didn't really think we imperfect human beings could actually live like this.

And, brothers and sisters, we'd be absolutely right about that last part.

Because, you see, what Paul exhorted here, what Jesus taught – that kind of behavior is absolutely, 100 percent against our human nature. The kind of behavior they taught about doesn't come to us imperfect human beings naturally.

My human nature tells me to strike back, to strike back hard against what I perceive to be evil. To make myself the judge of what is evil and then to defeat evil on its own terms. And, if it looks like the evil is stronger than I am, that I have no chance of winning against evil, perhaps I just avoid it, turn my head, and do nothing.

But, Jesus knew better and the apostle Paul knew better. They knew that our human response, they knew that doing what comes naturally, ultimately won't work against real evil

They knew that ultimately evil is overcome not by more evil. Evil isn't defeated by avenging what we perceive to be wrongs done to us or even done to others. And, evil isn't overcome if we sit passively by and pretend it doesn't exist.

No, evil is overcome by good. Good based on an ethic of love – love that is authentic and genuine. Love, producing goodness, that can be humble enough and patient enough to let God be God, to allow God to be the one who is the final judge of what is evil.

If Christianity is true, if it is really true that God is love, if it is true that the revelation of God's love is the only power to reconcile the world to God-self, then it is only love – love that produces goodness – that can overcome evil. That is what will work against real evil. Jesus knew that. The apostle Paul knew that.

We can dismiss what they have said as soft and impractical and foolish. But, we do so at our own peril and at the peril of all God has created. We can be tempted to domesticate these words, to act like they really don't apply to us; but when we do this, when we do this, we strip away their power - their power to change us and to change the world.

Paul's exhortations require that we not be conformed to this world, as we read last week, but that we be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Being transformed isn't transforming ourselves. It's not something we can do to ourselves. It is a gift from God, a generous gift of grace.

Being transformed isn't about being a little better or a little nicer. It's about being a different person; having a new perspective, a new mind-set; a renewing of our minds that allows us to act in ways different from our imperfect human nature.

Being transformed isn't something that happens in a flash. It's a process. I don't think we blink our eyes one day and suddenly become that new person Paul talked about. We will at times allow ourselves to be overcome with evil; to strike back and try to defeat evil on its own terms; to try to put ourselves in God's place when it comes to the struggle to overcome evil. Or just to give up and to ignore what is happening around us.

But, thanks be to God, even then this gracious and generous God gives us grace to repent and return, to open our hearts and lives once again to God's transforming spirit.

So, my brothers and sisters, in a world where evil does exist, in the words of Paul, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

AMEN.