

Thirteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): “Assignment: Overcome Evil with Good”
Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
September 2-3, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

On this Labor Day weekend, we’ve just received St. Paul’s marching orders for this coming fall, this coming school year, and the rest of our lives. Here’s *The Message* paraphrase of today’s lesson from the Letter to the Romans:

9-10 Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

11-13 Don’t burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don’t quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

14-16 Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they’re happy; share tears when they’re down. Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody.

17-19 Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. “I’ll do the judging,” says God. “I’ll take care of it.”

20-21 Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he’s thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good. (Romans 12.9-21)

That’s what we as Christians are supposed to do. Unfortunately, we often fall short, forgetting about God’s commands and pursuing the world’s priorities. You may have heard how fewer and fewer Americans are even identifying themselves as religious. A recent Gallup poll reports that for the first time ever, less than half of Americans belong to a church, a synagogue or a mosque.¹ So, sadly, that makes us the exception rather than the rule. An article I read last week says:

Evidence is growing that Americans are becoming significantly less religious. They are drifting away from churches, they are praying less and less and they are less likely to say religion is very important in their lives.

Faith is more important than ever, but faith seems increasingly absent. Why is that?

When thinking of people who tell pollsters they don't identify with **any religion at all**, we may ask, "What's **wrong** with them?" But what if there's something wrong with **us**? What if the "religion" we project through what we say and do is toxic? What if our religion is anything **but** what Paul urges us to embody?

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection... extend hospitality to strangers... (Romans 12:9-10)

Folks who **used** to belong to churches and no longer do, folks who **used** to identify as Christians and no longer do, often say it's because hatred not love, exclusion not welcome, are preached and practiced. The article reminisces:

...in 2001, Falwell and the Rev. Pat Robertson suggested that the Sept. 11 terror attacks were God's punishment for the behavior of feminists, gay people and secularists. My view was that God should have sued them for defamation.²

Lots of religious leaders since have announced that various national tragedies, natural disasters, war, pestilence (like COVID) and famine are God's judgment, always on **other** people. They're basically saying, "You're so wrong, God's got to kill you." Is that an accurate profile of the God who so loved the world that He sent the Son, the only Son, to be our salvation??

What church leaders say can be really damaging when it's a perversion of the Gospel, but ultimately people are more apt to judge Christianity by what the Christian in the pew **does** than by what a single church leader **teaches**. Each of you may be the only Bible another person ever reads. What'll be the message he or she will come away with??

Whenever we need a litmus test of our faithfulness to the Gospel, let's ask ourselves this question: **Is faith active in love among us and through us?** Are we an island unto ourselves, making sure the drawbridge is **up** so the world can't invade our sacred, "safe" space? Or is the drawbridge **down**, reminding us to go out and carry Christ into the world, allowing the Holy Spirit to use us as channels through which God answers prayer, joyfully and generously sharing our blessings, recognizing that many of them come **to** us in order to flow **through** us to others? Is the drawbridge **down** to invite the world to come **in**? A chaplaincy is ministry directed at people within a given institution like a hospital, a branch of the military, a school. We are **not** a chaplaincy, created to take care only of our own members. We are a faith family **in** the world for the **sake** of the world. We are to be "in the neighborhood for good." That's what our Servant's Entrance banner reminds us, each time we see it and pass beneath it to enter the mission field of the world.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:18, 21)

Sometimes overcoming evil with good, living out our faith in the nitty-gritty of life, means picking up a painful cross and following Jesus, as He commands in today's Gospel. **What is the evil to be overcome?** Anything that denigrates the children of God, dehumanizes human beings, snuffs out hope, engenders despair. Overcoming evil with good can be risky business. It often aggravates the powers-that-be, entails doing the hard work of rowing against the cultural tide, and sets us up for taking it on the chin for sticking up for whoever are considered the current undesirables. In the mid-1800's the Irish were the unpopular newcomers; by the early 20th century the Italians filled that role; in the 40's it was the Japanese and the Germans; in the 60's it was Puerto Ricans. People of color have

always been on that list. Lest we fall prey to such prejudice, let's remember what God says when we complain about **any** of God's children: "Really? They're one of my favorites!"

In St. Luke's telling of this Gospel Jesus talks about taking up our cross **daily**. I read a study that says Jesus was making this point: following Him isn't often a matter of newsworthy heroics, but more likely of hourly kindnesses, constant awareness of the needs of others, frequent willingness to set aside our convenience for somebody else's benefit, unending humility to let God's agenda take precedence over our own.

Our assignment for the fall isn't rocket science, but isn't easy either. The syllabus:

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Let's work hard on that homework and continually ask ourselves: if I'm the only Bible someone's ever read, what message am I sending? Amen.

¹Nicholas Kristof, "Americans Are Losing Their Religious Faith," *New York Times* (Aug. 24, 2023), A17.

²Ibid.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

