

Sermon: A Counter Intelligence
Scripture: Romans 12:9-21
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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There was an old lady who would come out every morning on the steps of her front porch, raise her arms to the sky and shout "Praise the Lord!" One day an atheist moved into the house next door. Over time he became irritated at the little old lady. So every morning he would step onto his porch and yell after her "There is No Lord!" Time passed with the two of them carrying on that way most every day. Then one morning in the middle of winter, the little old lady stepped onto her front porch and shouted, "Praise the Lord! Lord I have no food and I am starving. Please provide for me, O Lord!" The next morning she stepped onto her porch and there were two huge bags of groceries sitting there. "Praise the Lord!" she cried out. "He has provided groceries for me!" The atheist jumped out of the hedges and shouted "There is no Lord, I bought those groceries!" The little old lady threw her arms into the air and shouted "Praise the Lord! He has provided me with groceries and made the devil pay for them!"

I thought that captured the dynamic going on in the Apostle Paul's account of what it looks like to love one another. The old lady and the atheist, in Paul's words are "heaping burning coals" on each other as they love one another; the atheist feeds his hungry enemy and his hungry enemy associates his act as being the hand of God. You might say they refused to be overcome with evil but overcame evil with good.

Paul's beautiful passage in his letter to the Christians in Rome is worth committing to heart for it speaks to the very essence of the Christian faith; hatred and violence overcome by forgiveness and love. To many people across the ages Paul's letter to the Romans written some 20 or 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection is in fact the summation of the whole New Testament. One of the founders of Protestant Christianity, Martin Luther, built his entire theology on this little letter to the Romans, saying that it was the very purest expression of the gospel. But there have been other scholars and other Christians throughout the ages who have read Paul and this letter and have said that it ruins the gospel, actually and that Paul took the religion OF Jesus and turned it into a religion ABOUT Jesus. They say that Jesus was trying to make it all about God and Paul made it all about

Jesus. Paul elicits strong responses on every side but that he influenced the Christian religion and our understanding of who Jesus was can not be denied.

So there are about 14 letters of Paul to the early church that make up a good portion of our New Testament, but unlike the Gospels, Paul hardly gives any information in his letters about Jesus' earthly life. It's so close to the resurrection that Paul writes only of how to live with the presence of the living Christ in the here and now. But whether writing about the historical Jesus or the Christ of faith, what is clear to all the early writers is that Jesus transformed hatred and violence into goodness and love and that his followers were expected to do the same. It's only after Constantine, in the 300's, when Christianity became the religion of the state, that anyone would dare try and justify violence in Christ's name... of course, because how can an empire including ours in the 21st century sustain itself without certain violence. But that this is justification and at odds with Christ's life and teaching seems apparent.

You might have heard the writer G.K. Chesterton's assertion that Gandhi paraphrased also in a statement that goes like this: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It's been found too hard and not tried." And it's Paul's account of what it means to love as Christ loved that they are talking about; for if Christianity is about loving the enemy and transforming hatred and violence into forgiveness and love, then I would guess there are more people who say they are Christian than who actually practice it.

For there is a certain counter intuitiveness that is required for us "to bless those who persecute us", as Paul suggests. There is a certain counter intelligence that is necessary for us to "not be overcome by evil but to overcome evil with good." And if this is the heart of our faith, if we are Christ-centered, meaning we place at center the one who returned abuse and crucifixion for forgiveness and love, then it seems Christian churches and seminaries should be hot bed cells of counter-cultural practices of love and they should be organizations who are radicalizing people to sacrifice themselves for the sake of justice and kindness and humility, right? If only such things were going on alongside our religiously radicalized violent brothers and sisters in this world and if only acts of terror in France and Beirut and Syria didn't

mobilize militaries and the shutting down of borders but rather mobilized crazy peacemakers risking themselves by rushing in to bring love and healing. For sure there are those people in the world but they don't have the funding or the numbers that the military has and they seem more the Christian exception than the rule.

But I don't want to get too impractical about what's possible for us. Here we are in our sheltered and privileged lives in the northeast of America with jobs and families and full calendars and bills to pay and Thanksgiving and Christmas coming and realistically not many of us are going to express our discipleship to Jesus by running off to places of grave conflict to try and replace violence with Christ's peace.

But still, developing the counter intelligence that Paul is talking about can apply to our small everyday interactions as well as the more dramatic ones. In fact it's the every-day training in such counter intelligence that can have untold ripple effects in the world AND as we develop ourselves in such small ways when larger responses are needed we might be better more prepared. And so we can ask about our own little lives - where are places of tension and struggle, situations of anxiety in my life that tend to shut me down or tighten me up or harden my heart? And then we can ask how we might step into those situations with an intelligence that is counter to our fight or flight instincts. Because that's what is being asked of us in Paul's passage: when in times of stress rather than fighting or flying, our two base survival instincts, we instead choose something bigger and deeper, we choose to love.

So for instance, as our bulletin cover indicates, when our temptation is to build walls to protect ourselves and practice security, the way of Jesus is to build a bigger table and practice hospitality. When our temptation - Lord lead us not into temptation - is to shut down borders and not let "them" into our country or our states, the way of Jesus calls us to make beds and let them into our homes! When our temptation is to curse another, up one side and down the other, the way of Jesus is for us to pray for them and offer them a blessing instead.

Ok, so let's try it and see how it goes. Bring to mind an enemy, a person who you really struggle with, someone who has done you or someone you know wrong or someone you are jealous of, in rivalry with, and take a moment and pray for them.

Something like: “Lord God, I ask for your blessing to be upon so-and-so. Your goodness, your light and your blessing... not so they will change or be better to me but for their sake, that their lives will simply be blessed.” You don’t have to feel it, - you see, that’s how we come to dismiss these commands because it’s impossible to make yourself feel warm and cuddly affection toward someone you don’t like but that’s not what love is. The love that Jesus and Paul are talking about is much more exacting and harrowing and it’s about seeking the good of the other whether you feel like it or not. So come on “Lord, bless the life of so and so...” just do it in this moment of silence.

SILENCE

That’s love’s counter intelligence and it’s a muscle that we can develop. When everything in us says curse that person, we pray God’s blessing upon them. “It’s not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting but rather its been too hard and not tried.”

But it’s not just in interpersonal situations that Christianity can be tried and the way of Jesus practiced, for we have many enemies within ourselves. Again it was Gandhi who once said – “the only devil’s in this world are those running around in our own hearts.” So another worthy question - how do we not fight and do violence against the devils of our own nature but rather bless them and transform them by love? What are the less than desirable parts of ourselves and how do we give thanks for those places of weakness and ask for them to lead us deeper into a receptivity of God’s grace and God’s love.

Or to develop this counter intelligence further are there particular place of anxiety and struggle in our lives that cause us to hunker down and close off and can we then do the opposite thing from that tendency. For instance if we are not feeling heard by someone, let us determine to listen to them in a new way. If we are needing consolation, then let us look for someone to console. Do you hear the St. Frances prayer in there – “Lord grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand. etc...” Saint Frances knew intimately and practiced constantly the alternative way of Jesus. Or what if, for instance, we are stressed about our finances and in response we gave money away rather than

conserving it... we give away as an expression of our faith in a God of goodness and abundance and in a world that quite simply runs better on generosity than on anxious hoarding of resources.

And so we are going to have one more practice along these lines to end my sermon. In the fall season most churches are concerned about collections, if they are going to get enough pledges for their coming budget year, if they are going to get enough in the offering plate to cover their expenses. And as generous as this church is there is still some anxiety around our expenses and our budget so we are going to practice the counter intelligence of Jesus this morning by giving an offering instead of taking one!

Here's how it's going to go. In these offering plates we have placed a bunch of money and we are going to give an offering which means as the plate comes by you have to take money out of it. You can feel free to put money in as well if you would like but you are required to take some out. And with that money you have to do something good with it and something good could be as simple as taking a couple of dollars and buying yourself a coffee this week – a gift from the church to you because we love you, or you could take a fiver and add it onto a dinner tip for a waitress who is working hard for her family this holiday or you can take a few of these bucks and add more to it and give it to a homeless person that you walk by each day but have never stopped for. Or use it as seed money to encourage you to buy groceries for that old woman next door who begins her day saying “praise the lord!” We are all going to go out from here on this thanksgiving week required to practice random acts of goodness with the money from our church. Ok? I know it's going to be weird and hard for some of you to reach into the offering plate and take but you gotta do it. The practice of goodness and hospitality is awaiting you... so let's get to it....