

## **"Godly Work"**

Romans 12:9-21

September 3, 2017

The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

### The Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

There are times in preaching when you just feel silly. Putting on a robe and climbing up here into this pulpit, you feel out of place—like a pair of brown shoes with a tuxedo, as the old joke goes. Especially when having to follow the reading of a text like the one I just read from Paul's letter to the Romans.

Could there be any clearer or more concise description of the Christian life than that? It's hard to know what to say on top of a text like this one. Paul methodically spells out the work we Christians, and therefore the church, are called to do. And it is so clear, who doesn't get it? Who could possibly be confused about the work that Christian people are supposed to do?

Obviously, there is something wrong with my premise, or this will be a very short sermon! No, given what we see and much of what we hear these days from those invoking the banner of Christianity, in order to spew hate and justify rhetoric that can only be considered hate speech, tells us that something is completely missing regarding Paul's clear exposition of the way Christian people are called to live. There is an alternative version—something that is being called Christian, these days, and it is fake and it runs completely counter to the teachings of Christ.

Cheryl Wheeler is a wonderful folk singer (how's that for a transition!) who also happens to be hysterically funny. She sings a beautiful love song about her wife. In live concerts and as a kind of premise for the song, she talks about how in a previous life she must have done some amazing things to be so fortunate to have her as her wife.

And the chorus goes,

I must've been Gandhi or Buddha or someone like that,  
I must've saved lives by the hundreds everywhere I went,  
I must have brought rest to the restless, fed the hungry too,  
I must have done something great, to get to have you.

Cheryl Wheeler usually follows up that lovely song by singing an alternative version to it. She acknowledges that she is no day at the beach to live with, and imagines her wife as a saint, barely tolerating her most of the time. And so she speculates that her wife has her own version of the song, expressing her frustration for having to put up with her. That chorus goes,

I must've been Hitler or Satan or someone like that,  
I must've caused death and destruction everywhere I went,  
I must have brought torts to the tortured, beat some nuns up too,  
I must have done something bad, to have to have you.

So with that in mind, and just out of curiosity, I wondered how this text from Paul's letter to the Romans would sound if it were to be rewritten in a similar fashion. So I took the liberty of rewriting it for us. You heard me read the lovely words of Paul a few moments ago. Now listen to this alternative version.

Let love be shallow, rejoice and gloat over evil activity, flee from the good; love one another only if it is to your advantage; seek ways for you to be honored above all others. Do not be misled into

having hope—it's fake, it can't be trusted; be impatient and temperamental in suffering, pouting and demanding resolution to your problems now.

Blame those in need for their condition, and feel no obligation to help them; exclude the strangers and foreigners who scare you. Get even with those who persecute you and curse their name. Envy those who rejoice and do not let your heart be softened by those who weep—they're weak. Provoke constant conflict with one another; be haughty and flashy, never associating with the lowly—they're losers.

Always claim to be wiser than you are, and trample over that which is noble in the eyes of all. If your enemies are hungry and thirsty, by all means starve them and crush them, for by doing this, you will show everyone and prove to them that you are the superior person.

And finally, brothers and sisters,

Do not be overcome with evil...but good luck with that!

Sadly, that revised and inverted version, sounds very much like the political discourse and rhetoric we are too used to hearing today. Speech that, I'm afraid, is becoming commonplace—no longer shocking but normal, in a perverse kind of way.

And we can expect it from certain corners. Hate has been around forever. Fear of outsiders and foreigners is nothing new in this country. And racism has been a part of this country's history from its earliest days. But when people wrap themselves in the mantle of Christianity and seek to justify their political ends, that in no way come close to reflecting the teachings of scripture or to the Christ who showed us the way, we need to stand against that. We need to name it and call it wrong.

You know, those early Jewish converts and Gentile followers of Jesus understood Christianity as a kind of coping mechanism that helped them in their suffering. And it's important to understand what Paul was talking about when he wrote about suffering here in Romans. He wasn't talking about the great persecution of Christians at the hands of the state that would come later. That had yet to happen during the time Paul wrote this.

Rather he was addressing the fact that those earliest followers were made to feel like outsiders within their families and social networks, including among co-workers and neighbors because they rejected things like idol worship and chose instead the ways of love, forgiveness and peace. They were ostracized for being strange, odd—crazy even.

And I would simply argue that it's really no different from the way the language of love and grace, peace and gentleness gets lost and easily dismissed as irrelevant—a joke even, by so many today who espouse the complete opposite. And think about it. When what began as a coping mechanism for people who felt like outsiders in society, has become instead for a vocal, militant faction, a way to justify discrimination, hatred and the oppression of others, it is absolutely repugnant.

I mean, how far has the ancient practice of following Jesus drifted from its earliest days? How far off the track have the People of the Way fallen? People of the Way, that's what early Christians were called, you know? People who were following a new and different way of living and being in the world.

You'll notice that it's always the most vocal proponents of a convoluted and revisionist version of Christianity who support things like segregation and who look the other way over inequality and injustice. They are quick to champion the right to life but seem completely uninterested in addressing the

quality of life after one has been born. They are also the ones who demand that the Ten Commandments be present in places like courthouses. But why aren't they just as zealous about The Beatitudes? Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor and the peacemakers. Why, do you suppose, don't they care about that?

The one thing a text like this one points out to me, is that given Paul's injunction to love one another with mutual affection and to live in harmony with all, means that there is absolutely no room for anything remotely resembling hate speech. Ever. Not only is hate speech wrong it is evil. And it is evil because it ultimately seeks to divide people against each other based on their perceived worth, which ultimately refuses to acknowledge that we are all created in God's image. We are all God's children.

The neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan, alt-right terrorists and religious fundamentalists, are stealing our religion, and they've been doing it for years. They are taking the good name of Christ and making Christianity into something unrecognizable, and certainly incompatible with the teachings of scripture and the life and ministry of Jesus.

They've got a religion without a sacred text, a political ideology that addresses their fears without establishing a defensible theological framework, and a hijacked, shadowy version Christianity without a Christ. And you simply cannot call yourself Christian if you deny Christ and his teachings, if you've even bothered to learn what they are.

And so churches like this one, and people like you and me, have real work to do by speaking out, and in demonstrating our true calling as people of faith. I'm not interested in repaying anyone evil for evil. What I am committed to doing is banding together with others, who love their Lord and take their faith seriously enough to name evil in our age and renounce it. And then proceed by living alternatively to the way much of the vocal, recently emboldened world seems determined to live. I want to stand with others in living as People of the Way. Of not taking the bait and lowering ourselves to their level, but by remembering our higher calling, as Paul spells it out in this twelfth chapter of Romans.

Today's text opens with the words, "Let love be genuine." And when you think about the rest of what Paul espoused, it is all activity rooted and grounded in love. Mutual affection. Hospitality to strangers. Feeding the hungry and giving the thirsty something to drink. Living peaceably with all. Genuine love encompasses all of these things and more.

And we are seeing genuine love all over the place in Houston right now, as people are responding with compassion to those in need. Not people who need to be convinced that demonstrating compassion is the right thing to do, but who know it intuitively. People who are busy at this very moment, reaching out to neighbors in need, opening their doors to the stranded and the dislocated—helping and caring for—loving strangers they have never met before.

It's what good people do. It's what kind and compassionate people do. And it's what Christians and all good people of faith are required to do.

Amen.