

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Proper 17 Year A
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Today, as we renewed and affirmed the vows we made for ourselves or were made on our behalf at our baptism, we promised to persevere in resisting evil, we promised to love our neighbor as ourselves, we promised to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. Our passage from Paul's letter to the Romans today clearly instructs us to let love be genuine and to hate what is evil. If we are to live into our vows to God, if we are to inwardly digest the scriptures, then we must comprehend what it means for us as Christians to hate and persist in resisting evil.

I am proposing to you that to hate, as to love, is meant in the Bible to be more than a feeling within our hearts, but rather that which invokes appropriate action. There's a wonderful plaque at Holy Cross Monastery which says, "Love must act as light must shine as fire must burn". When we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, we are not being called to have a warm fuzzy feeling for everyone in the world, but rather we are to act in this world as God acts with us, with compassion, mercy, and always toward justice. When we are called to hate evil, we are not called only to have a passionate dislike for someone or something, we are to act to resist and eradicate that which is evil in this world.

Evil is defined by the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms as that which opposes the will of God. The definition goes on to clarify that evil is both personal and structured oppression that takes shape in societies. So, if the will of God is love, then evil is hatred that has seeped into the very fabric of our society. If the will of God is respect for all people, based upon God's love for each of us, then evil is the prejudice set within the culture and the norms of our society that keeps individuals from becoming all that God dreams for them. If the will of God is peace among all people, then evil resides in the policies or procedures that disenfranchise some people from mainstream society, either through socio-economic or racial oppression. Our passage from Paul tells us today that we are to hate that which is evil, that within our own lives or society, which oppresses others.

When I was taking my General Ordination Exams, this comprehensive testing required of all those graduating from seminary, the theological question to answer was "Is there such a thing as intrinsic evil?" Now intrinsic evil takes the definition of evil one step further, by stating that it is that which directly opposes the will of God, and that which is wrong in every circumstance. I think this is why my classmate, Megan, in her recent blog, wrote, (and I summarize here) that there are some circumstances (i.e. those containing intrinsic evil) where we don't have to consider both sides of the issue, in other words, the side of an argument or a policy that directly opposes God, does not need to be given equal weight as the side that supports the will of God. We may want to listen to the other side's perspective, we may want to stretch to imagine how we can learn how that perspective developed in that person's life, we may want to sit with the

situation long enough to offer a compassionate response to the other perspective, which always my work when I volunteered as a PA advocate for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. There was nothing a perpetrator could say to me that would make me think that what that person did was right, was anything other than evil, entirely opposing the will of God, but I could find a place of compassion for that person, for the life or history they had lived that brought them to this place of abuser. But, abuse, judgment, prejudice, hatred of others due to race or ethnicity is never right. It is never the will of God, and Paul tells us we are to hate, to actively resist and eliminate that which is evil, that which is against the will of God.

The question that has been in my heart this week has been, "If the KKK marched through Shippensburg, what would I do?" What would my "hating evil", actively working against that which opposes the will of God, which I surely believe the Klan is about, what would it look like?

If hate were only a feeling, I could sit in my home in the woods, 10 miles away from the action, and passionately dislike the Klan's message of prejudice and violence. But I'm not sure if that's what Paul intends when he's addressing the Jesus followers in Rome, when he says that we are to hate evil, for there of course, the forces of oppression of the Roman Empire were strong. So I think, as Christians, we each need to look at the question of what does "hating evil" look like for us. There is no one answer that fits each one of us. What we should agree upon is what is evil, for we know what God is, and therefore we know what God is not. But how we respond can vary, I think often, by what particular gifts and calling God has given us. For some, it will be prophetic speech, in protesting, in writing blogs, in speaking out in the public forum. For some, it will be providing education around the issues, so everyone can more fully understand and discern where evil shows up. For some, it will be encouraging others to take a stand, perhaps by writing letters to their congressmen. For some, it will be through healing, by prayer, by reconciling neighbors, by seeking out peace, by offering a welcome to all.

Mother Carenda spoke eloquently last week about the midwives in the story of Moses' birth as the first role models for civil disobedience. The flame in their hearts to know and love God and do to God's will was stronger than their desire to obey the oppressors and kill all newborn boys. Their hearts were on fire for God and for God's way and they quietly resisted the evil of oppression. They went about their lives doing what was right, without direct confrontation with the Pharaoh's men. Their action is a wonderful set-up for Jesus' line in our gospel: for those who want to save their life will lose it, those who want to lose their lives for my sake, will find it. They risked their very lives, in their civil disobedience, for the sake of God. For some, this may be our story too, that the fire within our hearts is so turned to God and God's will, that daily we build strength, so that when confronted with evil, we will be mandated to do something about it. We will say "no". We may be like the midwives, going about our business, doing what is right, adhering to Desmond Tutu's claim that each time we do an act of kindness or do something that is God's will, there's another drop in the bucket of goodness, and eventually, that bucket will overflow and goodness will conquer evil. God's goodness will win and we will have been a part of that.

The midwives, through their devotion to God, ushered Moses into life and in our story this morning, Moses has his own encounter with the holy in the burning bush experience. Clearly, God wanted to get Moses' attention. Moses wasn't yet in the spiritual place of the midwives, ready to lose his life to gain his life, for he wanted more from God, more information, more credibility, more reassurance. Sometimes the path to conviction to love God and to hate evil is a long one, where our doubts and fears trip us up, delay us or distract us. But I think one of the points of Moses' story is that YHWH, God, the great "I AM" was there with him. God was saying, "I am, I am here with you now, I was there with your ancestors, and I will be with you always." YHWH instructs him to take off his sandals for this is holy ground, which means all ground, all places we set our feet, is holy, and therefore a place where we should honor God, love God, and resist evil. This means in the classrooms, on the school bus, on the playground, in the office, in our living rooms, in our church, the holiness we encounter calls us to honor and respect the God of love and life.

If I were to bump up against my question about what I would do if the KKK marched through Shippensburg, I may be like Moses, questioning if I had the authority, the qualifications, the credentials to speak out. Maybe I would be searching within my heart for the courage to take a stand, to resist the evil they are spewing into our community. Maybe I would be praying that my heart would be set on fire enough for me to act responsibly and faithfully as one of God's beloved.

In whatever way I respond, or you respond, to whatever is evil in our lives and in our world, it is a conversation between you and God. I am happy to help facilitate that conversation, if that's helpful to you. One important thing to remember, I believe, is that God will show us the way. Sometimes, we will be aware that God is lighting a fire under our feet to get out and do something. Other times, God may be smothering the flames so only coals are left, to burn persistently yet slowly. God will draw us close. God will draw us back. For it is through God, that we will learn how we are to hate the evil around us. But it's a conversation we need to be having with God.

To let love be genuine and to hate evil takes several things on our part. Each Sunday, as I prepare for the Eucharist, and water is poured over my hands as a symbol of purification, of making myself in the right space with God so as to openly participate in this glorious act of our redemption, I say a prayer, which goes like this: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." To know how to let love be genuine and to hate evil takes a clean heart, one stripped of my own ego and closely held opinions, so I can be open to God's wisdom and will. To know how to let love be genuine and to hate evil also takes a right spirit within me, one of humility, patience, and willing sacrifice. For part of my life will be lost, of the way I was, of the way I thought, of the way I acted, in order for me to gain life fully in Christ.

And there's one more thing we need: a strong soul.

Here's a portion of a prayer by John Phillip Newell, known for his role in our current thinking of Celtic Spirituality:

Thanks be to you, O God
For the strong arm of those who have given me shelter in my life
who loved me from the womb and carried me as a child.
Who guarded me like watchful angels and wept when I was in pain.

Thanks be to you, for the men and women
Whose passion for the poor is undying
Whose prayer for the oppressed is tender
Whose defense of the wronged is fierce.

Grant me the strength to cry for justice,
To be patient for peace
To be angry for love
Grant me the grace of a strong soul, O God.
Grant me the grace to be strong.

Yes, grant us the grace, O God, to be strong to live into our baptismal vows, to inwardly digest Paul's letter to the Romans, and to more closely adhere ourselves to God's will and to let love be genuine and to hate and evil.
Amen.