

Proper 17A
Romans 12.9-12
The Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams
August 28, 2011

Blessed be the Name of God

Amy and I don't leave the island often, maybe as foot passengers to go to Ivar's or Arnie's for lunch or supper, but not much more than that. Of course, when we have to go off-island, we always make the most of the trip. That means that we often stop at Costco or Trader Joe's for supplies and staples. That seems to be the case for most people we know.

These off-island trips, the ones that take us beyond Mukilteo, often irritate and disorient me. I think I have lost the capacity, for instance, to drive along Evergreen Way and find anything. There's so much stuff, so many signs, so much information, useful or not! When we finally spot where we're going, I pull into a parking place and have to rest, get my breath, get settled before getting out of the car. We've only been on this island for nine months, and I have lived in urban areas much of my life, but I seem to have lost very easily my capacity for quick and quirky urban decision-making. Things just seem to whiz past me! Perhaps, if I went more slowly, I'd see whatever good and beautiful there is to see.

This experience comes to mind as I read through the words of Paul in the passage from Romans that we've just heard. Unlike the sign boards along Evergreen Way, virtually everything that Paul has for us this morning is worth considering, worthy of our attention, but the pace at which everything comes is simply too fast, too quick for proper attention. In its own way, it, too, is a bit frustrating.

Paul is telling us, his readers, how to carry out the Christian life, what it's made of. He is telling us what to value and how to conduct our lives. It is a gentle recitation, for the most part, but properly revolutionary toward the end. Lest you miss it, come with me and drive more slowly, perhaps walk, alongside what Paul says, and let's see what we can find. Along the way, I have some things I want to tell you about.

"Let love be genuine," Paul begins and all the rest that he has to give us is built here. It's the sort of first line that invites more and more interpretation and its simplicity

soon evolves into more and more layers of meaning. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor [which I take to mean respect]. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

“Rejoice in hope,” he continues, “be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” I have a friend who is in prison in Texas. He is a man who was 42 years old on the 14th of this month, an age between the ages of my two sons. He has been in prison for seven years. Until I moved from Texas last November, I have visited him regularly, beginning the day he was first arrested. He is the second son of dear friends, members of the parish from which we have come.

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” Malcolm and I long since gave up discussing his guilt or innocence. What we both knew was that he was going to be in prison for a good while. Malcolm is a big man, 6’3 or 4” and weights perhaps 230 pounds. He’s an excellent basketball player and very well informed about sports. Because of his relatively advanced age, he’s called “School,” meaning “Old School.” Like a considerable number of inmates at the Luther Unit in Navasota Texas, Malcolm is an American of African descent.

The focus of Malcolm’s attention and energy since he entered the Texas Department of Corrections has been on getting himself together by means of prayer and Bible study, and by going to college. Very diligently and very regularly, he has pursued these, and to his great good. Much of our time together was spent talking about his prayer life and his life in school, although we did talk a good deal about sports, because neither one of us could help it!

All going well, Malcolm would have received his Associate of Arts degree from the local junior college this December. He “would have” but he won’t, because of a particularly telling incident. Perhaps two years ago, Malcolm became implicated in an initiation rite in the prison, an initiation about which he knew nothing. One day, just before lunch, a small, skinny white kid, a skinhead, a new kid to the unit, ran into Malcolm. Malcolm let it pass. Then the same thing happened twice more on subsequent days. This third time, Malcolm pushed the young man away and he was observed doing

so by the guard. Turned out, the skinny little kid was obliged to take on a big black man so as to earn his place in the skinhead “brotherhood” in the prison.

What happened to the skinhead, Malcolm and I never learned. Malcolm never saw him again. What happened to Malcolm was that he was not allowed to go to school for a semester. Then, last fall, as an economy measure, the Governor of Texas decided to cut off the college educational program in Texas prisons. Malcolm is one course short of his degree. Between the skinhead and the Governor, Malcolm’s emerging self was put on hold, if not thwarted altogether.

Yet, and here is why I’m telling you this story, by the grace of God, my friend Malcolm, has managed to follow Paul’s counsel. “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” Not an easy things to do under any circumstances, and probably especially not easy to do in prison! I admire him very much. He is a source of strength to me, and I hope to you.

In Romans, Paul continues, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Live in harmony with one another...Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Almost daily, reports reach the west of terrible unrest in Zimbabwe and in the Anglican Church of Zimbabwe in particular. I met the current Bishop of Harare, the national capital, Chad Gandiya, twenty years ago while he was the Principal of the Anglican Theological College in Harare. Along with a number of African teachers in Anglican seminaries, I and a handful of North Americans, met in Harare to foster and participate in conversations about theological education in sub-Saharan Africa. As you might well imagine, it was a remarkable experience.

Currently, Bp. Gandiya and his diocese are under siege. Led by the current bishop’s excommunicated predecessor, Nolbert Kunonga, and supported by the military and police forces of the President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, Anglican churches, missions and schools are being confiscated. Once they are occupied by Kunonga supporters, the clergy and their families, teachers and staff are being turned out. By reports from what I take to be reliable news sources, both in Zimbabwe and in the west, the energy behind these attacks has very much to do with Dr. Kunonga’s own self

aggrandizement. His work pleases Mr. Mugabe because the president resents the presence in Zimbabwe of what he considers white colonialist interests. Kunonga appears to the president to represent the africanization of the Zimbabwean presence of the Anglican tradition. Dr. Kunonga seems to have no allegiance except to himself and Mr. Mugabe. The efforts of the Archbishop of Canterbury have been of no avail.

Paul writes, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Do not repay anyone evil for evil...If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” As the Bishop and the diocese struggle through the courts to stop the assault and persecution, and as I read what Bp. Gandiya writes to his clergy, he has clearly heard and aspires to live by what Paul requires. It is remarkable and beautiful. What I have described is going on today, this Sunday morning, in the world we live in.

Paul continues, “...’if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...’” We have heard this before, but then Paul adds, “...for by doing this you heap burning coals on their heads.” I take this to be a rather too graphic description of what our kindness will do to our enemies—they will be forced, as if by burning coals, to surrender and forsake whatever counts as hostilities toward us. I can think of no other reading that would be consistent with what the Apostle has said to now.

Our reading ends, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” We are not imprisoned as my friend Malcolm is, nor are we under active persecution like Bp. Gandiya and his diocese, but we do have ways we can live by and act out the life that Paul describes. Our own enemies are obvious: greed, neglect of the poor, disregard for the hungry, lack of shelter for the homeless and destitute, homophobia, domestic violence. We can work with determination to rid ourselves and our communities of these enemies, these evils. We can work diligently to supplant hostilities with a deeper respect, to rid the world of war. We can, as Paul says, “Contribute to the needs of the saints,” and “extend hospitality to strangers.” There are ways that we can mold ourselves into the faithful people that Paul intends us to be.

The more slowly we drive past these verses in Romans, the closer we look at them, the more we are obliged to see the dimensions of the life we have chosen, or the dimension of the life that has chosen us. Whichever way we read it, what Paul tells the Romans simply reiterates what Jesus has told us all. Life with Jesus is not a simple thing

and the slower we drive and the more we look, the more complicated it becomes. Yet, amidst the complexities there are wonderful glimpses of what things are really like, if we have eyes to see.

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