

On Being Transformed

In last Sunday's reading from The Letter to the Romans, Paul urged: *be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.* This Sunday, Paul gives us a list of behaviors which, if followed, will go a long way to accomplishing this transformation. Christianity is unique, among the world's major religions, in its emphasis on *orthodoxy*— right belief. In the other major religions, the emphasis is on *orthopraxy*— right practice. In recent decades, there has been a movement within what is sometimes called the emergent church, away from viewing Christianity as a system of beliefs toward *practicing* it as a way of life. This has included creating, or rediscovering, practices that can help us to be more Christ-like in how we live our lives.

In today's reading, Paul gives guidance to those who were trying to follow the Way of Jesus, in the earliest years of the church. He begins with love: *Let love be genuine.* Some of his advice is about how to live in close community with others: *Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Live in harmony with one another . . .*

I remember a conversation with the Abbot of Glastonbury Abbey, in Hingham, Massachusetts, in which he commented that you can learn all you need to learn about yourself, and how to live well with others, in a monastic environment, where you are continually confronted with others' personal quirks and neuroses rubbing up against your own personal quirks and neuroses. I suspect that the same could be said of any church or small town community. Loving one another, and striving to live in harmony, becomes a *practice* precisely when we find it difficult to do so. The person who really gets on our nerves becomes our teacher in discovering how invested we are in *our* way, or *our* view, and how capable we really are of loving another when that other isn't, to our minds, very lovable. Paul also counsels Christians, in the community of the church, to practice hope, patience when times are tough, and perseverance in prayer. We are also to practice generosity toward one another and hospitality to strangers. This is love as action— something we *do*, rather than as a warm, fuzzy glow— something we *feel*.

Love as a practice is even more challenging when someone is actively doing harm— to us or to others we care about. *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* Really? Why would we want to bless those who persecute us? *Do not repay evil for evil*, Paul writes. At the same time, he says, *hate what is evil . . .* Is this a contradiction? I don't think so. I think that Paul is telling us that discernment is necessary. This isn't a sloppy sort of "I love everybody" and "It's all good" kind of love. Love needs to be genuine. Evil is named for what it is, and we are to "hate" it. But not the *doer* of the evil.

I once heard Mary Luti, a retired Andover Newton professor and UCC pastor, tell a story that I found both moving and challenging. During the Civil Rights Movement, when demonstrators

gathered together they would often sing spirituals and freedom songs to bolster their courage and to remind themselves of the principles of non-violent resistance. On one occasion, a group was singing a song that lifted up various heroes of the movement with the words, “I love (so-and-so) in my heart,” for example, “I love brother Martin, I love brother Martin, I love brother Martin, in my heart.” After several verses, each one naming a well-loved leader, someone began to sing, quietly, “I love Hoss Manucy, I love Hoss Manucy, I love Hoss Manucy in my heart.” There was a dead silence, and then, slowly, tentatively, other voices joined in. You see, Hoss Manucy was a vitriolic and outspoken supporter of segregation, and the leader of a gang of thugs who carried out a reign of terror against the black community in St. Augustine, Florida. Singing “I love Hoss Manucy” was the practice of loving your enemy, and blessing those who curse you, at the deepest and most difficult level. The wisdom, here, is that what we are trying to overcome is the fear and the hatred that create Hoss Manucys, and if we respond with our own fear and hatred, nothing good has been accomplished.

Paul tells us, *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* This acknowledges that sometimes it doesn’t depend on us, sometimes evil comes to us through no doing of our own. Paul’s words on the Christian practice of love ask us not to respond in kind: *Do not repay evil for evil. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* If our enemies are hungry, we should feed them. If they are thirsty, we should give them something to drink. But then Paul seems to spoil this caring advice by saying, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. This doesn’t seem very loving at all. It sounds more like, “Nyah, nyah, I’m better than you are.” But apparently, heaping burning coals on their heads is a metaphor for making our enemies ashamed, with the idea that shame may bring them to repent and change their bad behaviors. Sometimes this works; sometimes it doesn’t. But I have certainly heard stories, and perhaps you have, too, of people who were doing evil being changed by a loving response.

There’s one more place, in this reading, where Paul seems to depart from the path of loving practice. He starts out well, *Beloved, never avenge yourselves*, but then he seems to go astray: *leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”* How many of us, when confronted with evil on either a personal or societal level, have hoped, just a little, that hell might be real? When we see people apparently getting away with doing tremendous hurt and damage, it doesn’t feel right, it’s not fair. We want them to face some consequences, and the idea of God’s wrath can be pretty satisfying. But why would Paul put this idea, which really appeals to our baser natures, in the midst of a passage that appeals, very strongly, to our higher natures? If we take seriously, as Paul did, the idea that Jesus is a revelation of God, then I can only think that God’s wrath will be about repentance and healing, and that God’s vengeance will look a lot like forgiveness.

I remember a time, in my own life, when I was trying to forgive someone who had done me great harm. I had reached a point where I had mostly let go of my hurt and anger, but I still found some comfort in the idea that when he died, he would get his. And then I read, in one of church historian, Roberta Bondi’s, wonderful books, that true forgiveness involves giving up our desire

that the one who has harmed us be punished *in this world or the next*. Oh. I still wasn't there yet. But Bondi was right. My forgiveness journey, and the freedom it brought me, was not complete until I had given up any desire for vengeance, in this world or the next. So perhaps Paul is simply saying, "Let it go. Give it up to God. Desiring vengeance means that hatred still has a home in your heart."

The practices that Paul advises may seem to go against our human nature, but that is precisely the point. It is our human nature that needs to be transformed, *so that [we] may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect*. And the *practice* of love, whether we feel love or not, opens us to the transforming work of God's Spirit.

I'm going to close with a quote from Frederick Buechner, who writes, *remember Max Beerbohm's Happy Hypocrite, in which a wicked man wore the mask of a saint to woo and win the saintly girl he loved. Years later, when a castoff girlfriend discovered the ruse, she challenged him to take off the mask in front of his beloved and show his face for the sorry thing it was. He did what he was told, only to discover that underneath the saint's mask, his face had become the face of a saint.*

Amen.