

Finding Life

13th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 17a September 03, 2017

ROMANS 12:9-21

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

In writing to the Church in Rome, the Apostle Paul describes the life of those who belong to Christ. Some of Paul's description is what you might expect, some of it, not.

The Christians in Rome would've known how to live an honorable, ethical life; they had learned it since childhood, since even before they became Christian. They had in their schools the teaching of the Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, who said, "*Not life, but good life, is to be chiefly valued.*" And the Romans had their own philosopher, Virgil, and Virgil had taught students against getting carried away with our own feelings and passions, by teaching that "*Each person, makes their own terrible passion their God.*"

So the Christians in Rome, they knew a thing or two about living an ethical life, about personal honor and humility.

So what will Paul write to them which they could not have learned from, say, Socrates or Virgil before they even became Christian?

¹⁴ **“Bless those,”**

writes Paul,

“who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”

[Romans 12:14]

Those who persecute the Christians in Rome are the Romans. The Christians have left the pagan temples they grew up in, they have departed the altars to the state gods, they now refuse to give sacrifice to the Caesar, which every good Roman must do, and their fellow Romans now persecute them. Loss of job and status, loss of home and business, loss of family, even of life—the family who has been baptized into Christ Jesus stands to lose it all.

How could Paul write in this way—to tell Christians to bless those who persecute them? Wouldn't it have been a better letter if he had told them how to resist Caesar, maybe even how to build a movement to overthrow?

But it's, **“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”**

Paul is writing as an Apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul himself, having been a persecutor and murderer of Christian families, has been picked-up by Christ Jesus and made an Apostle to the Gentiles, an Apostle to preach the Gospel outside of Jerusalem to the farthest corners of the civilized world—and that includes Rome and all that belongs to her.

As an Apostle, Paul has been sent by Jesus, who, on his way to the cross, had taught,

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

[Matthew 16:25]

Neither Socrates nor Virgil had ever taught anything quite like that. They had taught how to find life, how to live an ethical life, an honorable life, even a life of love, but they had never taught, **“whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”**

Jesus turns everything on its head. It’s all reversed. Salvation comes through loss; to find life you lose it. What Jesus says is upside down.

If these Romans are used to hearing from their Caesar, *“I came, I saw, I conquered”*, from Jesus they will hear, *“I came, I saw the sin, I let myself be conquered and for the sinner.”*

It’s completely upside down. But that’s how the Lord of life gives life—he gives it through death. He gives victory through defeat. He gives salvation through mercy. He gives a cleansed conscience not by teaching ethics, but by forgiving the sin.

It’s upside down, it makes no sense, but it is the cross, and Paul is now given to preach Christ crucified, which to the Greeks and Romans is foolishness. It’s foolishness to us, too. For how can humiliation bring honor, death bring life, defeat bring victory?

It is foolishness, but to those who are being saved, it is the wisdom of God unto salvation.

Hearing of Jesus going to the cross to be humiliated and killed, we would want to join with Peter in saying, *“Far be it from you, Lord. This shall never happen to you.”*

We would rather hear of Jesus crushing those who oppose him, of him setting up systems of government to get entire civilizations under his control, of him giving lesson in ethics and methods of living by which we could better ourselves. If Jesus would do that, no one would ever say, *“Far be it from you, Lord. This shall never happen to you.”*

But Jesus will not let us know him apart from the cross, apart from being humiliated and killed, apart from his defeat and his publicly being joined with the sinners.

When Peter told Jesus that he should not let the cross happen, Jesus turned to Peter and said,

²³ **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”** ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”**

So now through his Apostle Paul, Jesus gives those Christians in Rome, and also us, life. It is a life redeemed by the blood of the cross, and now being lived under the cross. It is the life described by Paul:

⁹ **Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.** ¹⁰ **Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.** ¹¹ **Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.** ¹² **Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.** ¹³ **Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.** ¹⁴ **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.** ¹⁵ **Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.** ¹⁶ **Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.** ¹⁷ **Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.** ¹⁸ **If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.** ¹⁹ **Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”** ²⁰ **To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”** ²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

To the world, this life of belonging to Jesus can make no sense. It is foolishness. To our own sinful flesh, this life of belonging to Jesus makes no sense. It is foolishness.

But to those called by the Gospel, to the life we are given to live each day as the new Adam, to the life not of the flesh but of the heart of faith, this is the life of being daily cleansed by the Word of Gospel, of being daily renewed in the promise of Baptism, of hearing the voice of Jesus and knowing that in his Word of the cross, we find our life.

For he is the One who, when reviled, did not strike back, but gave himself over to humiliation; who when persecuted, did not seek revenge; who when falsely accused, he denied himself, giving himself over to the death of the cross; all so that, in his death, he could bring life to the sinner; in the shame given to him, he could bring honor to you and me.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.