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Isaiah 12:1-6

Romans 12:16-21

9/24/2017

“Do Good. Leave the rest to God”

## Opening

- Last Sunday, Sandra preached on verses 9-16 of this scripture, which describe the “marks of a true Christian”- those actions which characterize what it really means to live as a member of the body of Christ
  - o And we looked at the fact that while some in the body of Christ, think and act just like you, others see things quite differently.
    - So differently, that you may find yourself wishing to avoid them altogether.
  - o We identified at least 19 actions, Paul provides for dealing with people not like us.
    - And Sandra challenged us to read through that list of actions and to work on them- perhaps paying particular attention to the action which says “Don’t think that you’re so smart?”
  - o How did you all do this week, with that list?
    - Were you able to show love others?
      - Were you enthusiastic when serving God? Were you “on fire with the spirit” as they say?
      - How about being welcoming to strangers? Did anyone accomplish that?
    - It was sort of funny, last week, as someone was walking out of worship, they said to me, “Did you notice that when Sandra got to that part about “not thinking you’re so smart”, she looked right over at you?”
      - I laughed and thought “No, I didn’t notice. I was busy looking your way.”
    - That’s kind of the way it is with these “Marks of Christianity”- we tend more to notice when someone else isn’t doing them, than when we aren’t.
    - So, this past week, I tried really hard focus on humility and to not think myself so smart.

## Adding to the list

- Well, whether you mastered the list from last week or not, in this week’s scripture, Paul gives us a few more actions to add to our list.
  - o And in some respect, these new additions, don’t so much give us things “to do” as much as they give us things “NOT to do.”
  - o Today’s list starts with “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”
    - It then goes on with the instructions to live peaceably.
      - To never avenge ourselves, but to leave room for the wrath of God.

- And lastly, we are given the instruction to not be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil by doing good.
- As I read through these additions this week, it seemed as if God was saying “Look, don’t give credence to what others do, that works against you.”
  - “You just focus on the list I gave you last week and leave the rest to me”

## Vicious Cycle

- Now I don’t mind admitting that working through this list is difficult.
  - Achieving these marks of Christianity is hard and it can be painful
  - Because to love genuinely, means to love “no matter what.”
    - It means to lower our defenses, to open ourselves to the possibility of being hurt and to love indiscriminately.
  - As Christians, we live each day with that possibility.
  - And there are bound to be times when you feel as if you’re under siege!
    - And today’s scripture is about how we as Christians respond when we feel that way.
  - When we feel as if we’re under attack, we naturally want to fight back- “to return evil for evil”
    - That’s normal- it’s part of our human condition
  - We see this sort of thing swirling around us all the time.
    - People are hurt, frustrated and angry and they think that doing harm to someone else will somehow make them feel better.
  - That is crazy, but that’s a pretty common feeling, isn’t it?
    - I mean, we all feel that way sometimes- we feel hurt or angry and inside we have this irrational feeling that hurting someone else is going to make us feel better.
      - We think that hitting back at someone is the only way to assuage what we’re feeling- that striking back is the best way to defend ourselves.
    - Someone says something about you that isn’t very nice and the natural tendency is to say something back in revenge.
    - And then begins this cycle of “hurt me and I’ll hurt you more.”

## Vicious Cycle

- We see it all around us.
- A few days ago, as he was speaking to the United Nations, the POTUS launched a **personal** attack on Kim Jong Un, the leader of North Korea, referring to him using the un-endearing term of “Rocket Man”
  - Un responds, calling the President "a mentally deranged dotard"
    - I’m not even sure what a dotard is, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t a compliment.

- The President responds by saying Un is obviously a madman who doesn't mind starving or killing his own people and he will be tested like never before.
- Un responds by saying the POTUS has made an irreversible mistake, making it inevitable that North Korean rockets will visit the U.S. mainland.
- And today, U.S. warplanes patrol near the border of North Korea.
- Just yesterday, I saw a similar tit for tat in the news with the Golden State Warriors basketball team
  - Superstar Steph Curry announced to the press that he would not attend when the team visits the White House later this year.
  - The White House responds by publicly revoking Curry's invitation altogether.
  - Curry and other sports stars respond, referring to the President as a "Bum" and a "coward" and all sorts of other unkind terms.
  - Now, I think Steph Curry has every right to not attend any function he's not comfortable with
    - But making his decision such a public display, was bound to set off this vicious cycle we're talking about.
- It's everywhere- all you have to do is to look around you, at work, at school, in the news, in our politics and yes, sometimes in the church and you'll see this state of being.
  - Someone gets hurt and the only way their hurt can be fixed, is by hurting back.
- We know that this tit for tat insanity doesn't really work, right?
  - It doesn't work because when you hurt someone, it doesn't make you feel better, like you thought you would.
    - And it doesn't work because the person who's hurt now wants to hurt back.
    - And before you know it, you are caught up in this vicious cycle.
  - And one has to wonder where does this crazy cycle of "be hurt and hurt back" stop?

### **Where it stops**

- The Apostle Paul offers the answer to that question in this morning's scripture.
  - Returning evil for evil, may be a human reaction, but, in his Epistle to the church in Rome, Paul reminds us it is not a Christian reaction.
    - In fact, the Christian reaction is the opposite of that.
      - The Christian response is to never return evil for evil, but to be "thoughtful and make your conduct fair for everyone to see."
      - The Christian response should be good; and it should also be seen by others, to be good.
  - You know sometimes Christians can be harsh and unloving- we've seen that.
  - But if you look back at our list you'll see that those marks focus us away from that harshness, to what is fair and loving,
    - And we are to do those things in full view, for everyone to see.

- We do good and we let others know that doing good is what true Christians do.
- So, while as humans, we may wish to return evil for evil, as Christians we do good.
  - We are to live peaceably
  - We feed our enemies when they are hungry.
  - We give them a drink when they are thirsty.
  - We overcome evil by doing good.
- If I were to sum up this morning's reading from Romans in just a few words it would be this: "Do what is on your list and leave the rest to God."
  - If you want to stop this irrational cycle of hurt- if you want to stop evil in its tracks- doing good is how you do that.
  - Now, that's not an easy thing to do, but it is the Christian thing to do.
- As for anyone who might try to inflict hurt on you, leave any retribution in God's hands.
  - Besides, if we're busy doing good and letting others know that we are doing good for God, we won't have time to worry about our enemies.
- Before he was the President, Abraham Lincoln practiced law and one day he was approached by a man who passionately insisted on bringing a suit against an impoverished debtor, who owed him \$2.50.
  - Lincoln tried to discourage the man, but the he was bent on revenge.
  - When he saw that the man would not be put off, Lincoln agreed to take the case and asked for a legal fee of \$10, which the man paid.
  - Lincoln then gave half the money to the defendant, who willingly confessed to the debt and paid the \$2.50!
- Seeking vengeance doesn't pay. God knows that and as God's people, we know it too.
- By doing good, we show to everyone- even our attackers- what it means to be a true Christian.

### **Counter intuitive**

- Now, doing good, when we feel like striking back- IS NOT an easy thing.
  - It's counter intuitive – striking back is how we protect ourselves.
  - But as Paul reminds us, doing good is actually our best defense.
  - In Romans 12:20, Paul writes "for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." (Romans 12: 20)
    - That sounds a little like vengeance and in a way, it is.
    - Because by showing kindness, we can pierce the heart of our enemies.
  - Have you ever been in a situation where you misjudged someone, who was only trying to do something good and you said or did something which hurt them?
    - And later you wished you could take it back?
    - You thought to yourself "how could I have been so insensitive?"
    - You're embarrassed and it feels like someone has heaped burning coals of shame on your head?

- By not returning evil and instead returning good, we reverse that and heap burning coals on our enemies.
- When we stoop to vengeance, evil wins.
  - But when hatred is met with love, we find a cure for this condition.
  - As Christians, we are to show others, the same grace God has shown us.
    - To treat a person with kindness is how we do that.
    - And it is how we move ourselves off of this crazy cycle of revenge.
  - This morning's scripture from Isaiah makes this point well, when it says: "I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation.

### **Leaving the rest up to God**

- I'll finish by quoting John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who said: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."
- This week, I want to give you that as homework.
  - Keep count and see just how much good you can do this next week.
  - Especially notice those times when you feel like striking back and instead, do something good.
- As people of faith, we know the truth found in Isaiah- that it is God who saves us and that we can trust in God and not be afraid.
- And because of that, we don't need to return evil for evil.
  - We can choose to disengage from this cycle of revenge.
  - To our enemies, all we need to do is to love them and do good for them.
  - And we just can leave the rest up to God.
- And when we do that, the body of Christ is a much, much better place.
- Amen!