

OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this third Sunday of this Epiphany season:

Do not continue to be conquered by the evil, but conquer evil with the good.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

If the texts today, as they are grouped in the Church's service are not familiar to you, it is likely because the third Sunday of Epiphany does not show up in our calendars every year. In fact, there was no third Sunday of Epiphany in 2010 and 2011. That has to do with the days on which the Nativity and Resurrection feasts fall each year. So, even though we receive God's gifts through the One-Year Lectionary series, some Sundays, some years, we hear something relatively new.

So, for this relatively rare Sunday of the Church Year, our theme is centered on the thought of, "overcoming evil with good." Through God's cleansing Naaman of the uncleanness of leprosy, to Jesus cleansing the leper and healing the sick servant lad, God, through His Word overcame evil. The prophet Elisha declared God's Word to a leader of armies. Through that Word, God's will was worked through simple means. Jesus declared God's Word to a worshipping man, and to a different leader of military men. Through that Word, God's will was worked immediately among those who were both Jew and Gentile. God's will is to overcome evil, by continuing to conquer evil with His good. The key link in the healing miracles you heard this morning is the Word of God, that which creates and sustains faith – the True Good before God. That Good

¹ Romans 12:21.

brings forgiveness, healing with God, and, ultimately salvation by grace through the Faith. If you take nothing more home today from today's texts, know and believe that all of God's healing miracles have one ultimate purpose – to overcome evil in this fallen creation with God's creative good – so that we who are impacted by sin and all its effects may be given the saving Faith which declares us clean before God unto the salvation of our souls.

It is with the Word of God which creates and sustains the Faith that the Church in Rome was able to receive and act upon the words of St. Paul which you have heard, and will hear, repeated today. That Word of God is the power of God for His people at all times. It is through the Faith which God's Word works that the Christian congregation, including this one (in Catalina), may fulfill all the Holy Spirit's "instructions for Christian living," contained in His inspired texts. In fact, everyone whom God has joined into a Christian congregation is freed to follow all the commands God has placed before us because God, in Christ Jesus, has fulfilled all these words for us: *do not continue to be conquered by the evil, but conquer evil with the good.*²

Let today's texts be clear in your hearts and minds, as clear as the words which ring into your ears. That is, hear from them that God cured Naaman of the uncleanness of leprosy so that he was free to stand in God's presence. Hear that God in our flesh, Jesus, cured the leper who worshipped Him for the same reason. Hear that the Very Word of God healed the Centurion's servant so that God could sustain and

² *Romans 12:21.*

commend the Faith that enabled that non-Jew to remain in God's kingdom into eternity. In His Word, through His promises fulfilled in Christ Jesus, God overcomes evil with good.

That is ultimately shown in that God took on evil in the Person of Jesus. He allowed evil – all the sins of the world – all your sins, to be placed upon Him. He who was conceived, born, and lived without sin became sin for us, for you. In the Faith, His Faith, God's Faith, Jesus overcame evil with the ultimate good – His holy, precious, innocent blood shed into death on account of your sins, those you actually commit and those which you have inherited from Adam. In the death of Jesus, you received true healing – a cleansing by blood which presents you pure before the Presence of God. As those who have been cleansed by the Word of God, healed to new life in Him, spared from bondage to the grave and eternal death, hear a fresh translation of St. Paul's words for today, and know that you are free in Christ to fulfill every one of them:

Continue to be of the same mind toward one another. Do not continue to keep in mind the high things, but continue to associate with the low. Do not continue to be wise in your own selves. Do not give back evil against evil, continually thinking good things before all men. As you have power, all of you continue practicing peace with all men; do not continually avenge yourselves, O beloved ones, but all of you give place to wrath, for it has been written, "To Me is vengeance, I will repay," says (the) Lord. But, "if your enemy continues to be hungry, continue to give food to him; if he may continue to thirst, all of you give him drink; for continually doing this, coals of fire you will pile up upon his head." Do not continue to be conquered by the evil, but conquer evil with the good.³

Were you able to hear those words as yours to think and perform in Christian freedom? If not, repent, stop trying to keep the Word of God in yourself. Stop blocking

³ Romans 12:16-21.

the Word, for the Holy Spirit desires that it may have free reign in you. Believe that Jesus, true God and True Man, brought you true healing, cleansing, and eternal life when He became sin for you, died in those sins, and set you free from the convicting, killing, and condemning Law of God. In Christ alone, you are free to keep the Word of God. St. Paul wrote to the Church of old – words which stand for all time into eternity. Hear this blood-bought exposition of part of the Letter to the Church anew:

Continue to be of the same mind toward one another. Do not continue to keep in mind the high things, but continue to associate with the low. Do not continue to be wise in your own selves.⁴

Of what mind does the Apostle write when he says, *continue to be of the same mind toward one another*? One has to go back several verses before today's cutting from Scripture (properly called a *pericope*) to obtain proof for the answer, "the mind of Christ." Because, through the washing into the death and resurrection of Jesus that you received, you have been attached to the Body of Christ, He is your head. Any member of the body attached to that Head is guided by the mind of Christ, the Mind of God. Just as our minds, even those of which we are not conscious, including autonomous guidance of our breathing, blood circulation, digestion and so forth are directed ultimately by regions of our heads, so too, is our entire life as Christians directed by our One Head, Jesus. Because we are one in Him, united under Him, guided by Him through the means He has chosen, we are free to let Him concern Himself about our mortal and eternal good – not just as individual members of His Body, but as those united into one, stitched into

⁴ Romans 12:16.

His flesh as it were, by the holy threads of His means of Grace. In that freedom, united into one, we then fulfill His commands for today, and repent when we have failed to follow them. God, through St. Paul, continues:

*Do not give back evil against evil, continually thinking good things before all men.*⁵

By now, through the translations of the Word which you have been hearing, you have likely grasped the reality that St. Paul's words are for the Body of Christ. He is speaking to those knit together by the blood of Christ. Thus, individually and collectively, we are again being freed by God's Word to do good – to one another, and to all people. We all have learned, or are learning, that when we treat the individual parts of our mortal bodies rightly, with respect, not abusing them, we are likely to remain healthy longer. To take one's fist, to strike it repeatedly into one's jaw until it breaks, does not bring us any good. While elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus tells us that if our eye offends, pluck it out, or our hand causes us to sin, cut it off, the context of that passage, and its parallels make it clear that He uses human imagery to describe His call to spiritual repentance.

These words, then, are matters of the Faith, Christ's Faith: "do not repay evil for evil." When Jesus was reviled for His right confession of the Faith, when He was beaten in our sins, when He died in them, He did not give back for the evil poured upon Him. When all the powers of the Evil One came against Him, Jesus conquered them with the Good. He gave His pure self, and shed His blood to wash away sin. Even hanging

⁵ Romans 12:17.

upon the Cross, He prayed for those persecuting Him into death – all the while knowing that, because He suffered evil He was freeing His people from it. In Christ, you are free to follow God’s Word, as St. Paul continues:

As you have power, all of you continue practicing peace with all men; do not continually avenge yourselves, O beloved ones, but all of you give place to wrath, for it has been written, “To Me is vengeance, I will repay,” says (the) Lord.⁶

As you have been connected to Christ our Head, you have His power, His Word to direct your heart, mind, and thoughts. The death of our Head brought us peace with God. The resurrection of the same declares us right with the eternal Father. This means that, attached to Christ, our Head, we are free to “do peace,” with all people, and, in particular, with those who revile us on account of the Faith.

A good percentage of those who regularly attend God’s services in this place have begun a six-week study of Islam. One of the questions for which we would like an answer can be summed up like this: “how can we have peace with those who wish to kill us because we will not convert from the Faith of Christ?” The answer is given today, “as we have been given power, continue practicing peace.” The power we have been given is the power of God, His Word proclaimed and visible. We are given freedom to declare His peace, that which Christ won for us on the Cross, to those who persecute us.

Yet, we are not given permission to renounce the Faith to keep worldly peace. We are not called by our Head to compromise His forgiving Word, His saving death, His justifying resurrection. That is why St. Paul says, “as you have power....” God is not

⁶ *Romans* 12:18-19.

calling you to be a “doormat” for Christ. Rather, He is encouraging you to live in His power, to declare His truth as you have ability – many of the “you’s” in today’s text are plural: “all of you.”

Christ, when He was bloodied, beaten, and crucified for the Faith, gave His life for His enemies – not just those who nailed Him to the tree – for all, including you who sin daily. Our Head suffered to redeem His Body – that comprised of all the faithful from all time. That means that those attached to Christ, our Head, are free to follow His guiding, His thoughts declared for us clearly in His Word, when we suffer for the Faith.

St. Paul says,

But, “if your enemy continues to be hungry, continue to give food to him; if he may continue to thirst, all of you give him drink; for continually doing this, coals of fire you will pile up upon his head.”⁷

Where did St. Paul get those words of encouragement? Yes, from God, but, where specifically? The Old Testament, in particular, the Book of Proverbs. Some of us have learned to express what our Head, Christ, through the Holy Spirit, out of St. Paul’s words is saying, “kill them with kindness.” Yet, that is not what our Head is teaching as He encourages His Body to continue practicing His peace. The Lord is guiding His Body, and all its members to treat those who hate us – on account of the Gospel – with good so that they will repent, sorrow over and will to turn from, their sins. Through the ages, the imagery of heaping hot coals on a person’s head was not to literally “cook their brains,” but to represent repentance. By the third century these words seem to have been taken

⁷ Romans 12:20.

literally in Egypt. There, people who were repentant of their sins displayed their penitence by carrying containers of hot coals on their heads. That practice did not continue, but it shows physically how being shown the shame of one's evil actions toward a member of the Body of Christ can burn. As we are able, as long as we do not deny the Faith, even the smallest of our Lord's teachings, we do the good He works in us and through us, that His good work might bring others to feel the fiery burden of their sins, and lead them to turn from them. In such manner, we, as the Body of Christ, following our Head, continue to fulfill His command:

*Do not continue to be conquered by the evil, but conquer evil with the good.*⁸

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Epiphany III (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

II Kings 5:1-15a; Romans 12:16-21; Matthew 8:1-13

January 22, 2012

Pastor Michael H. Merchonise

SOLI DEO GLORIA

⁸ *Romans* 12:21.

TRANSLATION, FIRST DRAFT:

into the same one another all of you continue to keep in mind, not the high things all of you continue to keep in mind, but the lowly ones continue to be swept along. Not all of you must become wise for yourselves. Not evil against evil you all give back continually thinking good things before all men. If power that from all of you with all men you all continue practicing peace; not yourselves continually avenging, o beloved ones, but all of you must have given place for the wrath, for it is having been written "To Me (is) revenge, I will pay back," says Lord. But, "if he may continue to be hungry the enemy of you continue to give food to him; if he may continue to thirst, you all cup him; for this continually doing coals of fire you will pile up upon the head of him." Not all of you continue to be conquered by the evil but all of you must victor by the good the evil.

TRANSLATION, FINAL DRAFT:

Continue to be of the same mind toward one another. Do not continue to keep in mind the high things, but continue to associate with the low. Do not continue to be wise in your own selves.⁹

Do not give back evil against evil, continually thinking good things before all men.¹⁰

As you have power, all of you continue practicing peace with all men;

do not continually avenge yourselves, O beloved ones, but all of you give place to wrath, for it has been written, "To Me is vengeance, I will repay," says (the) Lord.¹¹

But, "if your enemy continues to be hungry, continue to give food to him; if he may continue to thirst, all of you give him drink; for continually doing this, coals of fire you will pile up upon his head."¹²

Do not continue to be conquered by the evil, but conquer evil with the good.¹³

⁹ Romans 12:16.

¹⁰ Romans 12:17.

¹¹ Romans 12:18-19.

¹² Romans 12:20.

¹³ Romans 12:21.