

11 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17 – Year A – August 31, 2011 - Homily  
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28  
Susan E. Wilmot

How many of us know the song, “We shall overcome”? Do you remember the circumstances of its popularity? Anyone? The song is actually well known as a protest song. It was written in 1947 under a slightly different title, but became most popular as the song of the American Civil Rights Movement during the late fifties and sixties. The lyrics are from a gospel song written by Charles Albert Tindley, an African Methodist Episcopal minister. Being associated with a non-violent resistance movement the song reflects many of the themes we heard about in tonight’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” What a great opening line. Some of us get confused about the feeling or emotion of love and what God commands of us as genuine love. In divine parlance, love is a verb. As humans, we struggle to have loving feelings towards people we don’t necessarily like. God says – and as some of you have heard may say before as well – I don’t need you to like everyone, but as a follower of Jesus Christ, you must love everyone. You might be thinking that’s an impossible, and unreasonable demand, one that we can’t fulfill. That response is our very human way of rationalizing ourselves out of doing something we don’t always want to do, even though it is God’s desire for our lives. Loving others, perhaps especially people we have a hard time liking is an act that honors God. Showing genuine love means behaving the way that Jesus behaves towards others, seeking the face of Christ in the other, offering ourselves in service to the other and so on. It’s really like the Golden Rule, where we say; **do** unto others, as you would have them **do** unto you. It’s a matter of faith in action, doing good whether we feel like it or not. When we behave lovingly towards others, an amazing thing happens. Surprisingly, we find that feelings of love, care and concern tend to spring up by virtue of our acts of loving care, compassion, and concern. One of the things I learned at the Diocesan Health Summit last Saturday was the power of the mind to shape our behavior. When we smile and think positive thoughts about the benefits of eating healthily and exercising before, during and after each time we do these, it changes the way we feel about exercise and diet. In the same way, being genuinely loving towards others through loving acts, allows the Holy Spirit to renew our minds, transform us, and align our wills with God’s will.

The next part of the reading is Paul’s utterly delightful, no-nonsense mini-compendium of the kind of actions that best express genuine love in and through our lives in Christ. We could summarize it by saying that we are to love, keep the faith, and live in hope. In detail, our love is the kind of love that Christ models for us: self-giving and sacrificial love, that strives to put the needs of others before ourselves. It encompasses compassion, and hospitality. Our faith gives us the strength and courage to share God’s love with others. And in the hope of the resurrection, we live in confidence, knowing that we are forgiven, knowing that we are being healed, knowing that we have a place in God’s kingdom, knowing that we are blessed with everlasting life through our faith in Christ Jesus.

The next major section of this reading also has another important theme for us to explore tonight. Since we live in an imperfect world, we have to live with the consequences of sin and evil every day of our lives. There’s probably not a single person here tonight, including me, who hasn’t wanted to ‘get even’ with someone for some real or perceived slight or worse. There are two

references to ‘getting even’ in this reading from Paul. The first is a direct commandment, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” The second is, “never avenge yourselves”. The bottom line is that whatever we may want to do, as followers of Christ, revenge or retaliation is not an option for us. Instead, we’re called to find creative ways of dealing with those who hurt us. This is not about denying the reality of evil in the world or in our lives. Evil *is* real. Evil *does* hurt, and it does matter how we respond to it. Paul tells us what God has already done for us in this regard. God has already overcome sin, evil and death through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. That makes revenge like an evil chain letter. If we pass it on, then all we’re doing is perpetuating the evil of the world. When we break the chain, when we break the cycle of tit-for-tat retaliation and violence in all its forms then we’re taking responsibility for our own emotional health, and refusing to let our lives be defined by evil. None of this denies justice. For specific acts of evil and injustice, we have laws that protect us, and a justice system that is supposed to enforce those laws. For everything else, we simply have to trust that God will always deal with evil in His own way, and in His own time. Everyone is accountable to God for our actions. Everyone.

As faith-filled Christians, it’s a privilege to know with certainty that God will take of business, especially the business of meting out justice. And guess what? That certainty, frees us to simply deal in goodness, to offer love and compassion, even to our enemies. The goal for every Christian in this respect is to fulfill Jesus’ commandment to overcome evil with good. In the face of our enemies, in the face of any opposition, suffering or struggle in our lives, prayer is our lifeline and most important connection to God.

Finally, there’s one curious phrase in the reading that we need to look at. It’s the part about heaping burning coals on the heads of our enemies through our acts of kindness. Heaping burning coals is an ancient colloquialism meaning that when we show Christ’s love and compassion, and model faith in action, our example alone can prompt others to repent and return to the Lord God. However, as in the case of Martin Luther King who, as you know, was assassinated, there’s no guarantee that our non-violent resistance to evil will not be met with violence. You and I are probably much less controversial figures in the bigger scheme of world affairs, and therefore much less likely to be a direct target in the way King was. However, we must understand and be prepared to accept the consequences of a sin-filled world that frequently dishes up hurt and pain, in response to our counter-cultural acts of loving-kindness. God’s desire is that we remain constant and steadfast in love, faith and hope. He doesn’t promise that it’s going to be easy. For followers of Christ, the words “we shall overcome” have already been transformed by God’s grace through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ into “God has overcome.” As members of the Body of Christ, we too share in Christ’s victory.

Amen.