

Holding on to what is Good

[Texts - Micah 4:1-5;
Romans 12:9-21]

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“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Some 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the Prophet Micah hoped and prayed for the day when instruments of war would be converted into implements for planting and harvesting; when nations would focus their resources on feeding people rather than fighting them; when peace would finally prevail upon the earth. 2700 years later, we still we hope and pray....

Yet here's the “Gospel truth”: As long as the majority of our world's resources are used to make war, rather than cultivate peace, the dream of peace will always remain a pipedream. That's because the way we choose to use the world's resources invariable shapes the world in which we live. If humankind's genuine goal is peace, then we will put our money and our efforts into feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and needy, raising-up the oppressed - offering people help and hope instead of disappointment and desperation. In other words, if we truly want a world where compassion and equality, justice and peace prevail, then you and I will passionately strive to make it so! And although this is a monumental task, it is one which can be tackled, one step at a time.

As Bill Toneff reminds us in our Continuing Testament, the first step we must take is to allow our faith and our intelligence to “take over” - to realize that in order to truly experience our own humanity, we must recognize and embrace the humanity of

others. We must stand-up against those prejudicial voices [around us and *within* us] that declare “other people” as being less valuable, because of their ethnicity or color, nationality or social status. We must actively advocate for the distribution of bread, rather than the deployment of bombs; medical care, rather than missiles; plows and pruning hooks, instead of swords and spears. We must petition the leaders of our nation to turn their patronage away from guns and violence, war and weaponry - and to convert their hearts toward peace. And we must keep in our own hearts those who are still suffering and dying because of on-going wars and violence, poverty and inequity.

Jesus Christ tells us, and shows us, that the only way violence and killing can be stopped is when the people of God reject it as a means to an end. Yet he also reminds us that this doesn't mean that we simply lay-down and capitulate to violence or injustice, but that we boldly stand-up and bravely speak-out *for* justice and peace. The awkward truth is, that people of good conscience must continually *fight* for peace! However, the first thing we must fight is the temptation to meet violence with violence - to “fight fire with fire” [especially since water is so much more effective].

In his letter to the church in Rome, Saint Paul puts it this way: “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good....So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all....If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals upon their heads.” Now I realize that this last sentence may sound a bit counter-intuitive, but maybe this real-life example can help illustrate how this can work.

For many years in Wunsiedel Germany, the small town that was once the burial-place of Adolf Hitler's deputy Führer, Rudolf Hess, neo-Nazis have held an annual march in Hess' honor. Normally, the embarrassed and disgusted townsfolk just stayed away from that march; but in 2014, they not only showed-up along the route, they actually cheered-on those neo-Nazis. That's because for every step those right-wing extremists took, local businesses and residents donated money to an organization that fights neo-Nazi extremism. Basically, they took that neo-Nazi event and turned it into an anti-Nazi walk-a-thon!

When the neo-Nazis learned about this plan they had a choice to make. They could either proceed, and help raise money for an organization committed to their downfall; or they could acknowledge that they had been out-manuevered and cancel the event. They chose to press forward - a decision that many of them later sorely regretted. As they marched, they were greeted with signs along the street thanking them for helping raise so much money to fight bigotry and hatred! Local residents even passed-out water along the route, and encouraged those marchers to keep-on walking for the cause of compassion and human equality! And though they didn't literally "heap burning coals upon their heads" they definitely seared an indelible image into those neo-Nazi's minds. In 2015, there was no goose-stepping in the streets of Wunsiedel!

In today's world, where any one with a Twitter account can spew his or her hatred, bigotry and ignorance with the push of a button, it's sometimes easy for us to have our own buttons pushed. And while our natural reaction might be to push-back with equally vicious venom, that only serves to perpetuate the negativity and animosity. Mahatma Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth only creates a world full of blind and toothless people." That's why Saint Paul's words to the Christians in Rome remain

so critically important for you and me today. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!”

As Christians you and I are called not to ignore evil, but to sow the seeds of goodness in its place; not to condone bigotry and hatred, but rather to fight them with the strongest power possible - the power of Divine love, forgiveness, and grace. This is never an easy thing to do; yet as Bill Toneff so eloquently reminds us, “We have to stop hating first, before we can ever start loving.”