

**August 31, 2008 – 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17) – Year A – RCL (track one)**  
**The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square – The Rev. Diana Carroll**

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. In the name of God, the holy and undivided Trinity. Amen.*

I'd like to begin today's sermon with a little word search. Find the name of our city in the reading from the letter to the Romans. Go!

All right, admit, it's kind of a trick question. The answer is in verse 10: "Love one another with mutual affection." But it's not very obvious in this translation. Another translation reads: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." Literally in the Greek, "Love one another in Philadelphia." Now that's what I call a relevant message for our congregation! Or maybe just a good sermon title.

Chapter 12 of Paul's letter to the Romans is kind of like a how-to manual for the Christian life. We've been reading through this letter all summer long. And finally, after all of the high rhetoric and complex theology, all the talk of justification and sanctification, righteousness and salvation, finally, Paul has gotten to the practical part. Chapter 12 could be titled "The Christian Life for Dummies."

This chapter is packed with great one-liners. "Rejoice in hope." "Persevere in prayer." "Do not repay evil for evil." You could preach an entire sermon on any one of these, which makes it a little hard to choose. But all of these instructions are more or less summed up in two big themes: "Love one another" and "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

We don't talk much about evil these days. Sure, it gets thrown around from time to time in the political sphere. But that's about it. Most of the time, we tend to think of evil as something "out there," something outside ourselves, or maybe something in other people. But the Christian tradition acknowledges that evil is not just "out there." It is also "in here." In our hearts, our minds, our communities. It is a part of our daily lives.

Just look at Peter in today's gospel reading. Last week, Jesus called Peter blessed, the rock on which he would build his church, saying that God in heaven had revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Messiah. And then the very next moment, as we heard today, Jesus tells Peter off and calls him "Satan," because he fails to understand what being the Messiah really means. As usual, Matthew's portrait of Peter hits uncomfortably close to home. We human beings are a strange mix of good and evil, channeling heaven one minute and hell the next. The goal for us is not to let hell prevail. As Paul says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." But this is not something that we are expected to do alone.

You see, Romans 12 is not really a how-to manual for *individual* Christians. It is a guide for life in Christian community. This is where the "love one another" part comes in. Love is what happens when we allow the good to be victorious over the evil in our lives. I'm not talking about love as desire or passion, feeling or emotion. I'm talking about love as action. Love that shows itself in all the ways that Paul talks about. Providing for each other's needs. Extending

hospitality to strangers. Refraining from taking revenge on someone who has wounded us or wronged us. Our love for one another shows itself when we allow ourselves to be so deeply affected by the lives of those around us that we will actually weep when they are weeping and rejoice when they are rejoicing.

Incidentally, I think weeping with those who weep is the easy part. It's not hard for us to feel affected by a sad story or a misfortune in someone's life, because we can imagine how terrible it would be if something like that happened to us. No, it is much harder to rejoice with those who rejoice when we don't feel like rejoicing ourselves. I'm sure we've all had the experience of going to a celebration of some kind when we didn't feel like celebrating. Maybe it was a birthday party, or a wedding, or a baby shower like the one we're having for Soozung this afternoon. When we feel we have nothing to rejoice about, it can be so easy to respond to the rejoicing of others with bitterness or resentment. How much harder to forget our own struggles and truly rejoice with those who rejoice.

This, too, is what it means to love one another. Contrary to popular belief, the Christian life is not just about playing nice and getting along. It means becoming deeply, intimately involved in each other's lives. And that requires us to become vulnerable. Authentic. To use Paul's word: genuine.

I would argue that the Christian life and life in Christian community are not two separate things. The Christian life is always a life lived in community with other Christians. And it is there, in community, that we learn to love one another with Philadelphia: the love between siblings. That love where we keep on loving someone even when we don't like them. (Maybe especially when we don't like them.) Where we continue acting with love toward each other even when our relationship is strained or broken, simply because we are bound together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I have a favorite image for this. Life in Christian community is like being coals in the middle of a fire. If you've ever spent time tending campfires or fires in fireplaces (and I mean real fireplaces, not the gas kind) then you know that keeping the burning coals close together is what keeps the fire going. The coals feed off each other's heat to stay alight. Take one out of the fire, and it will slowly stop glowing and go cold.

Our Christian faith is fed by the faith of the person next to us. We are kept going by the flame of God's presence experienced in and through every other person in the room. That flame of faith and love is what gives us the strength to overcome evil with good. It is also what gives us the power as a community to witness to the world around us.

You may have noticed that there are some other burning coals near the end of the reading from Romans. In the midst of all this love talk, Paul suddenly says we should feed our enemies, because it will heap burning coals on their heads. It doesn't quite seem to fit the rest of the passage, does it? But maybe those burning coals are not (as we might think) the coals of judgment or retribution. Maybe we can think of them as coals that are burning with faith. If we respond with love to those who seek to hurt us, maybe they will be touched by the fire of our

faith and moved to find out why it is that we choose not to repay evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good.

So let us love one another with mutual affection. Let us love one another in Philadelphia. Not just so we can support each other and get along among ourselves. But so that our community, our church, may become like a burning bush shining in the wilderness. So that our flames of love and faith may shine so brightly that everyone who walks by will want to turn aside and see this great sight. So that the fire of our love for one another will cause people to stop and stand still long enough that they can hear God calling to them out of our midst. Calling them by name.

Beloved, let us love one another. AMEN.