

Afflicting the Comfortable
Romans 12:1-2, 9-21
August 31, 2008

You all know the job description of an ordained minister...we called are “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable”...that’s what you called George and me to do! And today we have one of those “afflicting the comfortable” scriptures. Thus, the sermon title! Here is a secret about such sermons...we do not preach them because we have it all figured out, but because we have been afflicted ourselves! We wrestle with these scriptures and preach these sermons as a way of figuring out in our selves what in the world God is up to, how to participate as we listen more closely to God speaking in our times.

I believe that the apostle Paul was trying to do the same thing. It’s been so many centuries since he was writing his sermon-like letters to those first communities of Christians that we forget that he was just human. He did not have it ALL figured out either. He was listening to and following God speaking in his times as best he could. The letter to the church at Rome was mostly likely one of his last, if not the last.

“The work of a mature mind”, as one commentator has written. He was

writing to a community he had never met, a church that he did not start.

A community of Jewish and Gentile Christians who were trying to get along even though they had very different philosophies of life...a bit like the Democrats and Republicans in our political life together. The bulk of Paul's letter is to help these two groups of Christians understand from their very differing worldviews the meaning of God's Love born out in the life of a man named Jesus. And, even more importantly, he wanted them to understand the improbable, mysterious, joy-filled and very real nature of God's Grace born out tangibly in the death and resurrection of this Jesus who became known as the Anointed One, the Christ.

After a long treatise, eleven chapters to be exact, on the nature of God's Grace we come to our scripture for today from the twelfth chapter. Given that through Christ we have received the Grace of God, Paul now write about how we are to live together in community and as God's people in relationship with the rest of the world. Listen with me as Adrienne/Laura reads our text for today.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be

transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in sufferings, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, 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 on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Now everyone who got all of that, raise your hand! If we could just get it all, download it into our internal data base and start using it as our operating system, then we could just sing a hymn and go home. And I would win competition for the shortest service!

The world would be a much different place if we did get all that, if we could always live like that, wouldn't it? If we could consistently overcome evil with good...if we could always love genuinely...and we could live in harmony with one another...if we could bless those who

persecute us...always persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers....feed our enemies instead of bombing them...

But we don't get it all ... We get it here...in our heads, perhaps...the words make sense...they sound good...getting it consistently here, in our hearts...that's harder and harder still sometimes to put into action. *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* This is not easy stuff! My question as I allow myself to be afflicted by this scripture, is how do I get more of it into my heart and into my actions more often, more days of more weeks, throughout the rest of my life?

Paul writes, *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice*...by the mercies or the compassion of God. Compassion...the humane or Divine quality of feeling the suffering of another and wanting to do something about it. Being with another's passion...God is passionately with us inviting us into participation with God's own mercy. That is the witness of God's grace in Christ. Through God's passion with us, God's compassion, we

are empowered to present our bodies, meaning our whole selves, our everyday, ordinary lives as a living sacrifice or offering.

We put our whole selves and each moment of our lives in the offering plate. Not just our special spiritual moments when we feel righteous and close to God, but even those moments when God does not seem so close, even when we are not paying particular attention. To quote a friend of mine, Conor Coleman, one of our First Plymouth youth, “God holds us even when we are not watching.” We are created in the image of God, therefore our whole Selves all of the time, the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, are holy and acceptable, well-pleasing gifts back to God.

And this gift of our selves is simply our reasonable service, as the King James translates it, our spiritual worship as we heard in the NRSV. Isn't that interesting...here in Paul's first century Greek, spiritual is equivalent to reasonable, logical. And worship is equivalent to service. The gift of our selves back to God is our reasonable as well as spiritual service which is worship...wherever we may be, in or out of church. Perhaps especially, outside of church.

As we present our whole selves in this reasonable service we are transformed. We escape conformity to the molded patterns of this world which teach us to respond from a place of fear and domination and scarcity, a place where there is never enough love or money or food or kindness to go around...a worldview where we will be controlled or dominated so we better do the controlling and dominating first... where we better give our enemies what for before they give it to us...In the world's wisdom it is safer at times, more secure to stay in this mindset. And we could even legitimize it with Paul's own words... *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."* However, isn't that assuming that God's vengeance would look just like ours? An eye for an eye... It seems to me that the God of Grace whom we know through the life and teachings of Jesus has a very different idea of "vengeance" than our human idea. Otherwise Paul would not have been led to invite us into the next acts of compassion...*No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Through the grace and compassion of God we are transformed so that we are able to participate in God's work of overcoming evil with good...so that we can respond not from a place of fear...but from a platform of generosity, of care, of abundance, of neighborliness. God's compassion empowers us, renews our minds, our understandings of ourselves and others in our hearts, so that we can discern God's good and pleasing and perfect ways of being in this world. Yes, perfect ways, not perfect in that rigid, never make a mistake, every hair in place, without any flaw sense of the word, that unattainable sense of the word we have come to know in our times...but perfect in Paul's first century Greek sense meaning. Perfect meaning mature. Through God's grace and compassion we can respond to our enemies and to our loved ones perfectly, maturely out of our highest self which is created in God's image.

All this very well...and noble ...and lovely to strive for when we are in church...maybe even within this church community...because after all we are supposed to be nice to one another at church, aren't we? But what about out there? In the rest of our lives? Will it really work

out there in our offices and neighborhoods, in midst of political campaigns, within our own families, people we love that still drive us crazy at times?

Ahh....here is where the affliction comes in...can we do this...really? Can we allow ourselves to be uncomfortable enough to be transformed by God's grace and compassion so that we can overcome evil with good? In the big and little moments, decisions, and relationships of our lives? Can we afford not to try? Can we afford not to give our whole selves to the effort?

At a conference this past week sponsored by an interfaith group called the Network of Spiritual Progressives I heard a story that taught me about the urgency of these questions. Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg was speaking on compassion as the first step to overcoming evil with good in this world. Sharon began her speech by sharing a favorite image given to her by a friend named Bob Thurman. Bob is fond of saying, "What if Martians came down and sealed shut the subway car you are traveling in (she's a New Yorker..we can imagine a light rail car or city bus) ...sealed that car shut forever and so from here

to eternity those people in that car with you were your people...forever?
How would you live?"

Sharon continued by remembering a time when she was stuck in an airplane on the runway for four and a half hours. Imagine yourself in that situation...perhaps you have been in that situation...can't you just feel the tension rising inside you? She described the growing irritation and anger of people around her as well as her own. As she looked around the plane she remembered her friend's sealed subway car image and thought..."Well, I guess these are my people. Now what do I do?" Jolted out of her own anger, she began to look with interest at her neighbors. She found that when she became truly interested in why they were angry or frustrated, in the situations they were in, she could no longer be angry at them. Not that she necessarily liked all of them...but her interest transformed her anger into compassion for them.

My friends, living together in our families, in our church community, in our worlds of school and business, in our country, on our planet is not unlike living in that sealed subway car, is it? Who are our people?

May we always be afflicted by Paul's words to that young church in Rome, take them into our hearts and surrender to the transforming power of God's grace and compassion. May we seek *not be overcome by evil, but to always overcome evil with good.* Amen.