3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
Rolling Meadows - 1968

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

Romans 12: 20-21 If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon the head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

FIGHT FIRE WITH WATER!

with all of its hope & holy joy -

Now that you have come through Christmas ~~and things have pretty well settled down to normal once more - now that you~~ and have heard the great, glad tidings of Him who FOR US MEN AND FOR OUR SALVATION CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN AND WAS INCARNATE BY THE HOLY GHOST OF THE VIRGIN MARY AND WAS MADE MAN - ~~now that you~~ and have seen the blazing beauty and the blinding glory of the Epiphany Light - Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man question must be asked —— has it made any difference in your heart? Has it made any difference in your life? Has it made any difference in your relationships? Do people sense instinctively that you are one of those precious, privileged people who has been to Bethlehem - who has knelt down before the Manger Bed with the Shepherds heard the angels' song - who has followed the star with the wise men to find and worship the Christ Child - who has been in the company of this wondrous Savior as He went about His ministry of helping and healing, of suffering and dying that you might be brought back to God? Do others know - automatically - without your even saying a word - that you have been with Jesus of Nazareth? Is it obvious - beyond the shadow of a doubt - that you are a Christian?

St. Paul said that it must be. He said that knowing Christ - following Christ - being a disciple of Christ - changes everything. IF ANY MAN BE IN CHRIST, HE IS A NEW CREATION - OLD THINGS ARE PASSED AWAY - BEHOLD, ~~EVERYTHING HAS~~ all things are BECOME NEW. St. Paul was not just talking through his hat, or wrestling in the dark, or philosophizing. He knew what he was talking about - because he had experienced the transformation in his own life. Once he was a hateful, vengeful man - persuing and persecuting those who ~~did not see eye-to-eye with him~~ on the contrary his enemies - BREATHING THREATS AND MURDER AGAINST THE DISCIPLES OF THE LORD. Then, on the Damascus road, he came face to face with Jesus Christ. From that moment on, his whole life was changed. Instead of a brute to be feared, he became a man after God's own heart - a man as God wants every man to be - penitent for what he had done in the past and ready, in the strength of Christ, to act differently in the future. Pick up your New Testament and read the story of St. Paul's life, and you will have a more than ample description of what the Christian life and the Christian faith is to be.

This new life in Christ - this total transformation of body and soul, heart and mind, ~~which the new creation in Christ brings about~~ - works itself out practically, says the apostle, in the following way! Here is the tangible, visib demonstrable evidence of the Christian faith! This is the way you will act, and this is ~~what~~ ~~ay~~ you will do: 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; NEVER BE CONCEITED. REPAY NO ONE EVIL FOR EVIL, BUT TAKE THOUGHT FOR WHAT IS NOBLE IN THE SIGHT OF ALL. IF POSSIBLE, SO FAR AS IT DEPENDS UPON YOU, LIVE PEACEABLY WITH ALL. BELOVED, NEVER AVENGE YOURSELVES, BUT LEAVE IT TO THE WRATH OF GOD; FOR IT IS WRITTEN, "VENGENCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY, SAYS THE LORD." NO, "IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM; IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM DRINK; FOR BY SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD." DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL, BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD.

This is the way it works -

Despite everything St. Paul said, a lot of people, including some who think of themselves as Christians, prefer the old proverb: FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE. Counte force with force - meet spite with spite - hatred with hatred - revenge with revenge - an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

This sort of behavior may seem to be sensible - it may appeal to all of your natural instincts of what you think is only right, and just, and fair - BUT IT IS NOT THE CHRISTIAN WAY. The Christian does not fight fire with fire. He fights fire as firefighters do - with water - or as some of the more modern firefighters do, with foam... When a plane is in trouble and has to make a crash landing which might be dangerous because of the possibility of fire, it is not at all uncommon for fire-fighters to lay down a whole layer of foam on the runway - so that if the landing gear fails to operate, the plane will come down on that layer of foam and slide to a stop in a cloud of the foamy stuff which simply smothers any fire that might develop in one of the engines. If St. Paul were alive today, giving the same advice he gave 2000 years ago, he might say: Don't fight fire with fire. Fight fire with foam.

Foam doesn't look like much. It is just air surrounded by microscopic little globules of stuff. It does not look like much, but it does the job. It helps to put out the fire. Jesus Christ did not look like much to people standing there beneath His Cross. Some of them pitied Him - others made fun of Him. Yet I am here to tell you that this pitiable and maligned Figure was the very Son of God, sent by His Father to redeem us all from our sins. Don't pity Him. We are the ones to be pitied. On His Cross that day, the Son of God emerged victorious through suffering. This is the way it was supposed to be, and this is the way it was: the Messiah was to suffer and then to enter into His glory. He suffered ONCE FOR ALL, THE JUST FOR THE UNJUST, TO BRING US ALL TO GOD. He fought the fires of God's wrath in order that we might have forgiveness and life in His Name. He fought the fires of human hatred and bitterness in order that we might live in peace and harmony with one another. WHEN HE WAS REVILED, HE REVILED NOT AGAIN; WHEN HE SUFFERED, HE THREATENED NOT; BUT COMMITTED EVERYTHING TO GOD WHO JUDGES RIGHTEOUSLY.

It takes a tough man - a man in Christ - to go this way. This is no road for spineless cowards. St. Paul was talking about evil - real evil - as it appears in people: a brother who has just cheated his sister out of a portion of her inheritance - an employer who has laid off an old man just as he was due to receive his retirement pay - a husband who has cheated on his wife - a neighbor who has spread a false and ugly rumor about an attractive young girl. That's the kind of thing St. Paul is talking about.

What do you do when your name is defamed, and your rights are violated? I know what you are tempted to do: Fight fire with fire. The natural impulse in everyone of us is to seek revenge - to get even. That course appeals to people. (How else will that so-and-so ever learn his lesson if I don't teach him?) - (What can a self-respecting man be expected to do when he is faced with defamation of his character) - (I am not going to be a doormat for everyone to trample upon.) Driven on by this kind of logic and fed by self pity, anger grows, and soon the fat is in the fire. FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE, even if it burns up the whole neighborhood!

Logical as it may seem, this way of dealing with evil has some big flaws in it - ~~even from the logical point of view.~~ That's no way to fight fire. Fighting fire with fire only spreads the fire. Self-vindication, revenge, overcoming evil with evil, have caused untold havoc in the human family - resulting often in alienation, bitterness, and even loss of life itself. Sometimes the effects are known to last for generations. ~~When you think about it~~, that's no way to fight fire, even from the logical point of view. More important, however, in fighting fire with fire you are presenting a negative witness to our world which will prevent a lot of other people from considering seriously the claims of Christ.

Christ died for ALL - without exception. He prayed for His persecutors - He laid down His life for His enemies. He earnestly desires the salvation of every last man, woman, and child on the face of this earth. It makes no difference - Jew or Gentile - heathen or heretic - pimp or prostitute - friend or foe - HE DIE FOR ALL. And this is the new way of life that He offers to you and me too: WHEN PEOPLE PERSECUTE YOU, DON'T PERSECUTE THEM IN RETURN; BE A BLESSING TO THEM. WHEN PEOPLE CURSE YOU, DON'T GIVE AS BAD AS YOU GOT; BLESS OTHERS AND DO NOT CURSE THEM. HAVE A HEART FOR PEOPLE; REJOICE WITH THOSE WHO REJOICE AND WEEP WITH THOSE WHO WEEP. BE A FORCE FOR HARMONY RATHER THAN DISRUPTION. WHEN OTHERS ARE PROUD, DON'T PAY THEM BACK IN KIND. DON'T BE HAUGHTY, BUT ASSOCIATE YOURSELVES WITH THE LOWLY. DON'T HAVE EXAGGERATED IDEAS ABOUT YOURSELF; NEVER BE CONCEITED. REPAY NO ONE EVIL FOR EVIL, BUT TAKE THOUGHT FOR WHAT IS NOBLE IN THE SIGHT OF ALL. IF POSSIBLE, SO FAR AS IT DEPENDS UPON YOU, LIVE PEACEABLE WITH ALL. DON'T AVENGE YOURSELF, BUT LEAVE IT TO THE WRATH OF GOD. THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD: "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY, SAYS THE LORD." Leave vengeance to Him. He will take care of it. *That doesn't mean you are not to fight fire - evil!*

Don't say to yourself, though, that evil is none of your business. It is your business. A fire cannot be allowed to rage unchecked. It ought to be fought - with water, or foam, or with whatever will put it out. Water and foam may not look like much ~~[illegible]~~ but they put out fires. Faith and love may not look like much to a lot of people, but they are the stuff the world needs to put

out fires. Hate tears down, but it takes love to build. Violence can hurt, but it takes faith and love to heal. This is the "GOOD# St. Paul is talking about when he tells us how to deal with our enemies, people who want to do us harm: IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM; IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM DRINK, FOR BY SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD. DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL, BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD.

If there is any hope of saving human beings from the fires of hate and the consuming destruction of revenge, this is the way - the way of suffering love that brought our Lord to the Cross. Love does not always succeed. There is the possibility of lost love. This is love that is given to heal, to restore, to save. It is lost because it is rejected. The great God has poured out a lot of lost love.on a lot of people. But He keeps on loving just the same.

We have said that we do not want His love to be lost on us. We have said that we are ready to suffer all things, even death, rather than fall away from Him. Well, you know what they say about the proof of the pudding! Is there some one in your life somewhere for whom you are carrying a grudge - upon whom you would slam down the receiver if he were to telephone you this afternoon? Is there some prodigal son in your own family? How would you receive him if he rang your doorbell today? ..... DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL, BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD. Amen.