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Run for Dear Life from Evil

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Matthew 16:21-28

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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 suffering, 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. Romans 12:9-21

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I was asked recently why I tend to preach more on the gospels instead of the Epistles, most of which were written nearly 2000 years ago by the great apostle to the non-Jewish world St. Paul. My response reflects the primacy the church has shown these four versions of the life of Jesus Christ. Their intent was to convey the faith of a new and growing community that grew from a movement that would not die when its leader was killed on a cross on a

dusty hill in ancient Jerusalem. The Resurrection and the appearances of a Risen Christ and the sending of his animating spirit would be the beginning of a new faith build upon an older one that would reach all corners of the world and today claims billions of followers. Each time we read a section of the gospels – while standing as we are able – signally their importance – we get to hear them again as if for the first time. They are to be thought about, mulled over, and prayed through and through.

Take this morning's: Jesus said: For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

I've thought about and preached on these verses often when tackling the paradox of living life -- growing older and hopefully wiser along the way -- while at times succumbing to the temptation of trying to hold onto people and things and moments that I can never hold down, own, claim as my own or control. The harder I try to wrap my arms around something thinking I've finally figured it out, somehow it slips beyond my grasp or understanding. Saving and gaining -- losing and finding -- are all a part of our reaching towards the Kingdom of God that we've heard about in so many of this past summer's parables.

At our best, what we can do as a community when we gather is to remind ourselves to allow God to guide us back to what and who will really save us – what will really profit and add to our days.

Going back to the question asked of me: why don't I unpack the Epistles as much as the Gospels. I mentioned how these letters in the New Testament were written to address specific issues and controversies on communities such as Corinth, Thessalonica, and Rome. They often make for a better Bible study than sermon was my reply. Usually.

Perhaps the exception to my un-tested rule would be the passage today from Romans 12. For a generation or two that have grown up with self-help books crowding our libraries and booksellers, we are offered up a self-help guide for the ages. How to be a Christian.

St. Paul's advice to the church in Roman is, to our ears, straight forward and clear. As we hear it again, consider how it impacts our inner life known to God alone – our prayers and soul searching -- and how we live with others in our communities and the wider world. Inside/out. Internal and external impact.

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 suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Eugene Peterson's scholarly and playful The Message translation reads like this: *9-10 Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.*

v. 11-13 Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

It is believed that one of the reasons the church grew in the early centuries, before it was the official religion of emperors and kings, was its emphasis on love. It was love that moved early believers to care for the sick in the Pandemics of the ancient world. Women, the poor, slaves, took notice and word spread.

"Love is (to be) unpretentious!" is another translator's take. Some translations render this verse as "Let love be without hypocrisy" (New American Standard Bible).

Genuine love comes from the center of who we are and who we want to become. Love is always at the heart of seeking to know God. It is what Paul listed off in his other most famous list to the Corinthians read often at weddings: 4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends.

Who can oppose a message of love – defining God in the radically reductive God is love.

Love may never end, but it can be tested by the shadow sides of humanity. Hate was is evil. Make no mistake in a world of light and darkness, pushing and pulling.

The Message translation: *Run for dear life from evil.*

Are we on the same page for how to define evil, for if love is one side of the coin and evil the other?

How about we draw up a short list: abuse, unbounded hatred, torture, killing, exploitation, genocide. These are all evil acts perpetrated by people.

And I also hear the word evil tossed around to label or describe others. Buyer beware! When it comes to describing evil, an easy miscue is to claim another person is evil as if that ends the conversation.

My go-to source on knowing evil – in this case the evils of Nazi regime -- is the Lutheran Pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in *The Cost of Discipleship*) "Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are."

Calling a leader or politician or supervisor or landlord or corporate chieftain evil can seem satisfying in the heat of the moment, but there's a risk. It can deflect from our own biases and behavior. Indeed, evil acts can be perpetrated by individuals and systems and armies and mercenaries and governments and churches and their leaders.

The Church has had to come to terms with its role in the ancient and more recent past: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the bloody wars of the Reformation that gave rise to our mother church the Church of England, and the many abuse scandals to have shaken the faith of many over the last few decades. Christians should find it necessary to express remorse and contrition for what was done to others even when we were not the ones personally doing it. There are no carve outs for naming what is evil.

Run for dear life from evil.

Sadly, in a violent world, some cannot run fast enough.

For ten years I called Jacksonville, Florida home. I was ordained a deacon 32 years ago in the cathedral of that southern city. I am familiar with the part of the town that was the scene of the horrific murders last week of three African Americans by a 21-year-old white man who left a trail of blood and hate dripping manifesto. An evil act that is leaving communities fearing the worst.

There is a whole lot of hurt in our world today.

Once in a while someone comes along with a statement or a voice that can hold us a mirror on a given moment and ask collectively is this the best we can do for one another.

There are a few songs that come around once in a blue moon that seem to capture the feel – the current zeitgeist if you will – of a moment in time.

Anthony Oliver recorded the song Rich Men North of Richmond on his YouTube channel in his backyard in Virginia with how two dogs at his feet. The song reached number one out of nowhere by a self-proclaimed nobody in the music business. It is a protest song that is far from perfect, but has something to say to a hurting world.

I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day
So I can sit out here and waste my life away
Drag back home and drown my troubles away

It's a *dang* shame what the world's gotten to
For people like me and people like you
Wish I could just wake up and it not be true
But it is, oh, it is

Livin' in the new world
With an old soul
These rich men north of Richmond

What I've found so interesting about the phenomena of this song is the way people are responding to it, interpreting it, criticizing it, championing it, projecting their views up on it. All of which usually means there is some truth to be found.

Anthony took to YouTube and cautioned those who claim to know what he is saying. People of different races and backgrounds were resonating with this downhome country song in ways that would surprise.

Hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. v. 11-13 Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.

In the face of a flood of bad and tough news that can make anyone anxious and sad and helpless, St. Paul strikes a positive tone.

Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder.

We are a faith inspired by Christ who rejected an eye for eye justice. His most passionate apostle wrote:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

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.

14-16 Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Those are solid operating instructions, if not hard to live up to perfectly. That's OK in my mind.

Romans 12: If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.