

Sermon Text for April 15, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

I Samuel 24:16-22, Romans 12:14-16

“Loving those who hate you”

It has been an eventful week on a whole variety of fronts. On an individual level I ran a half marathon yesterday and when a young Mennonite girl in a full dress and head covering passed me at mile 7 I was looking for a way to go home. I finished, but can't say that I really ran it. On a family level my brother disappeared a week ago Wednesday and God provided a way in which for my brother and I to find him and bring him home to Lancaster County and to get the help that he needed last Monday. God was extraordinarily good to our family this past week even in the face of a very, very scary time.

The world has been turned upside down with the war that we have declared against Syria. In my 25 years of ministry whenever the United States has gone to War I have spoken out in my sermons against our aggression. I preached against the actions of Bill Clinton as it bombed Serbia in 1999. I spoke out against the war when George Bush was in power in the operations of the invasion of Iraq. I spoke against the killing of Bin Laden by President Obama. I know in pretty much each of these cases the wars and military operations were a result of human rights atrocities that the other side committed. But if we are a Christian nation, how do we justify an action that our Savior Jesus Christ would have abhorred?

My sermon title was chosen 2 months ago, these verses in Romans I have preached on once before, and that was the Sunday after 9/11. Yeah, it wasn't very popular back then. But we all have something at stake here, and my approach to Christian living is based upon the teachings of Jesus Christ whose teachings I interpret as condemning war. Now this may be a popular thing to say here in Mennonite country, but I know my congregation. Did you know that the Presbyterians were allowed to settle in this area so that they could be the buffer, they could be the aggressors against any unfriendly tribes or any unfriendly nations. We began our presence here in Lancaster County and surrounding regions as the defenders of the land. That is a part of our history.

As we go through life and things are easy, it is so easy to forget about God, but when the storms come, oh we turn to God non-stop throughout the day and the night. I learned so much this week. One thing that I learned which Paul addresses, or at least I was reminded of it, is how much what one of us does affects all of us. From a young Mennonite girl totally deflating your pastor, to a brother who mobilized a family for rescue, to a nation and a world at war with even more lives lost.

What greater example than our Savior Jesus Christ do we have in that the life, death, and resurrection of one person has given life to all of us. Not a single one of us is unaffected by what Jesus did for us. Even if we turn our back to God, God will never turn God's back on us and his resurrection is proof that he has offered us life as a triumph over sin and death.

Today, Paul calls us to be a blessing to those around us, even those who would mean us harm. This is not an easy lesson to follow for adults as we daily deal with issues of life and death, as we struggle with circumstances and decisions that can affect nations, even the entire world. What does Paul really mean, when he talks about our dealing with people, who only want our demise, or who really don't like us?

READ SCRIPTURE

My generation and any generation that lived through wars, or for me and many of you who lived through 9-11, or as we live through these school shootings, each one of us has been able to put a face and a name to the term evil like never before. Because of that these Scriptures have become in a sense less realistic, and less acceptable. How do you love a shooter who comes into your school? Can you love them after you have taken them out, can you love them after you have taken steps to debilitate them so that they won't hurt anyone else? There was a time, probably before September 11th, that I could preach on love your enemies and each one of us could think of a co-worker, a family member, a neighbor who really got on our nerves and we could say, okay they are the ones with whom I have issues and I have to deal in a Christian way about this issue. That still applies, but today, those squabbles seem so juvenile when put up with the face of Isis, or Bashar Al Assad, or Nikolas Cruz, people who have literally killed and tried to kill people with whom we can relate, or people that we know. How can you say turn the other cheek, this is no longer a flowery ideal, it is life and death. How can you say forgive someone 70 X 7 when they have proven that they will stop at nothing.

So today, we could ask Paul, how can you say bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse? How did Jesus, as he hung on the cross at the height of his agony say father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing?

How does Paul say this in a similar situation in which we find ourselves today? Let's look. The term bless is the Greek eulogeo which means to say nice things about or to praise. It is not ignore, or just overlook which is what we are usually taught. If someone bothers you, gets under your skin, just go on with your life and ignore them, smile and go on your way. This verse is so much stronger. It says bless them, compliment them, tell them how much they are loved. Eulogize them. IF we apply it to the work place, the one who has been getting on your nerves, and probably vice-versa, tell them how much you like their style of teaching, ask for their advice. Be genuinely interested in how they are.

So apply this to Isis. The term persecute, there are two terms that mean persecute, the first is at the individual level. Paul does not use that word here. Rather he uses the term persecute that means an organized, controlled attempt to make ones life difficult, ultimately for the end of extinction. A family member or a co-worker can persecute you. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. The Roman government or Isis can persecute you with the objective of eliminating you from the face of the earth. That was what the Romans wanted to do to Paul and his Christian community, that is what Isis wants to do with Americans.

No longer is Paul talking about those within the Christian community and how we ought to be able to interact with them in a moral and ethical way, but rather how do we deal with those outside of the community and how do we deal with them morally and ethically, when their purpose is our harm, nay even our elimination? Basically, how much can we trust God? Do we think that a small terrorist organization is beyond hope and redemption? Do we think that if we bless them that God cannot change their hearts of stone to hearts of flesh? If we are for God, then God can do all things, even forgive us from our sins when we least deserved to be forgiven, then God can certainly change the hearts of those that we least expect to be changed.

Paul understood God's grace as not being limited to those just within the Christian family. For God so loved the world. How about Romans 5 when we read that even while we were enemies of God, God's grace was revealed to us through the

sacrificial act of his Son. We cannot think that we have two separate ways to treat people because they may not be a part of our Christian family. We did that because our Scripture does not tell us to hate Muslims and to only love Christians. Or to love those who honor and protect our children and to hate those who would kill them. Our Scripture tells us to treat Muslims, as we treat Christians. Our Scripture tells us to treat shooters as we would treat our family. Our society says, that we can and we should treat people according to how they treat us or whether we like them or whether they are on our side or not.

You know my entire life I have been treated favorably. I benefitted from a good ol boys network in Florida. I benefit here from being the pastor of a respected church in this area. It is nice to get special treatment because of who you are. But not at the expense of those who are voiceless and powerless. If I am treated favorably and that treatment affects someone negatively, then I would rather be left without my desire fulfilled. Is that not the Christian thing to do? But it is hard to say and to follow through when you are the one benefiting. I know, and that is another application to the challenge that Paul gives to us today.

Paul says to hate what is evil. There is no doubt in my mind, as Ecclesiastes states, that there is a time for love and a time for hate, there may even be a time for war and a time for peace. I hate that which is evil. I hate the terrorism that has changed my life, that has taken the life of a classmate, that has turned our nation's attention away from issues of social justice to issues of military retribution. I think that is the greatest triumph of the terrorists is that they have changed our discussions in this country from how are we going to feed and clothe, and shelter those without food, to how are we going to kill the terrorists. For me, that is the greatest evil that the terrorists have accomplished.

I absolutely hate the killing that is taking place in Syria, and in our schools, and on our streets. I have no stomach and no patience for that which is evil and that which goes against God's Word. But when David let Saul go, because he knew that it was not his place to kill God's elect, was he being politically correct, or was he following God's Word? Saul and David were at war with each other, and David let him go. It is in times like these that we can't just pass over that. It is so easy in these times of political intensity to mistake our passion for vengeance, our desire for retribution as God's Word.

David could have, but let his enemy go, and Saul said who ever heard of such a thing? It was so revealing to Saul, that he said in his own words, you are more righteous than I am, you did the good thing, I did the evil. Who ever heard of such a thing? Who ever heard of letting a guilty one go? I have, and I thank God every single day that I was let go, as the rest of us were let go.

Remember, at one time we were God's enemies. We persecuted God by turning our back on God. I hope each one of us was able to put ourselves in the position of the Romans soldiers in the passion of Christ, as the ones who beat Jesus' body to a bloody pulp. It was our sin that made Jesus go through what he did. Do not allow your passion against evil to make you self-righteous because we all had a part in the death and torture of Jesus.

But thanks be to God, it is God's grace that serves us and not God's wrath. Because of God's grace we are able to live in harmony with one another. This is only possible if we see ourselves as God's guilty yet forgiven children. This will only be possible if during this time we know that if we let go, God is going to support us and keep us up.

The only thing that should guide us in our relationship with others is God's relationship with us, based on a love that is unsearchable. There should be no political correctness, political party, any person behind a microphone, but rather the Word of God which takes the side of peace and reconciliation often at the expense of our pride and our self-assurance. Amen.