

Sermon Series: The Rest of the Story: “Right Wrongs”

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Proverbs 25:21-22

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Woodside Presbyterian Church

Today’s proverb is from chapter 25:21-22, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you”. That last verse is a bit problematic. What exactly does it mean? That you will kill your enemy with kindness? When we were planning this sermon together we tossed a possible sermon title: Killing ‘em Kindly. A possible interpretation that scholars have offered was that showing kindness to your enemy will lead them to repentance by comparing this verse to an Egyptian rite of repentance—but heaping coals on one’s head as a sign of repentance cannot be found in any ancient Israeli literature, as much as we want to believe that our incredible act of kindness towards a person worthy of our hatred would cause that person to repent—you and I both know that there are plenty of people whose hardened hearts will not be moved by bread or water or even a glass of wine. The more likely interpretation comes from 1 Samuel 24:8-22 in which David who was hiding in a cave from Saul, his enemy, encounters him in a most vulnerable position and has the power, reason, and backing to strike him but spares Saul’s life... in his act of saving Saul’s life he placed hot coals of shame on Saul’s head, meaning that Saul’s face turned red with shame when he encountered the kindness of his opposition.

My face turned bright red yesterday and there was a little bit of shame involved. This past Tuesday night I found lice on my daughter’s head. I was shocked and disgusted! Probably one little act of sharing a comb with someone who shall remain nameless probably caused the situation. As I ran to the drug store to get something to treat her, she grinned wondering whether she would miss the first day of school. I called my neighbors as we were just having dinner together and I needed to warn him of our situation. And when I confirmed no school tomorrow, Ella praised Jesus for answering her prayers! Yes, no school! After doing loads of laundry, cleaning and more picking of the hair, I called the school the next day and had her stay another day away from any children. Then we went to the pediatrician who gave us a thumbs up to go to school on Friday. And on Friday night as I was still petrified of these little insects I kept on checking her hair while she slept (the only time she would let me check her hair without complaining much). And then I wondered whether I should run the comb one more time on me, another set of neighbors told me that the lice were mutating and the treatments were not working very well. And yes, at 2am I saw little tiny lice on the tooth of the comb that just went through my brush! Hands held up I just could not believe it—even after having treated my own hair I found lice on me! At 2 am, I did the only thing I could possibly do... took out my mayo and spread it all over my head, got a huge Ziploc bag and wore it on my head (this is what our 70 yr old Indian pediatrician told us to do to fight lice—given that my initial treatment for myself did not work). I stayed like this for

about 10 hours, running a super hot blow dryer on top of my mayoed Ziplog-bagged head, praying to God that the lice will suffocate in the mayo, and if not, maybe the heat of the blow dryer will steam boil the little eggs to death—talk about hot coals on your head! I was burning up! And having loud confessions with Jesus... I will never beg you for a sermon illustration ever again, Jesus! I get the hot coal verse!

My head was burning but my face turned bright red as I sat in front of Carrie Steele, a member of this church who has become my true sister. My face turned red with shame and gratitude that I had someone like Carrie who offered to comb my “licey” head. Does this body of Christ which we call Woodside church, provide you with friends with whom you can share your shame? It is only in this vulnerable state of being that you are able to have repentance and experience the power of God’s grace and love.

This proverb tells us to bring out goodness not only inside the church but particularly and especially outside of church. Notice the first verse, “if your enemy is hungry give him something to eat, if he is thirsty give him something to drink.” I’m assuming that at the least you don’t have enemies in this church. This word enemy in the original Hebrew is not a noun, but a verb, literally meaning to hate (sane). In other words, this proverb should be read more like this, If the one whom you hate is hungry give him something to eat, if he is thirsty give him something to drink. As much as we may want to make this into a proverb that speaks of enemies in another part of the world, or those who are poor and need to be fed and given clean water... as much as it may be about bringing food and water to those in need, it actually is more concerned with your state of heart, who do you hold a grudge against? It is when you turn to that person’s needs that you can turn your heart around, let go of your hatred, let go of your grudge, let go of your anger, let go of your hurt, and maybe not the person whom you hate will turn and repent but you will turn and repent and receive God’s reward of forgiveness. Because truly hate does not win over love.

I believe that this is why Jesus preached loving those who love you is not a big deal, but you want to experience God’s grace and God’s power, try loving those who hate you or better yet whom you hate. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor[i] and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (Matthew 5:43-47, excluding verse 46).

Love your enemy and watch God work in your life. Your situation may not change, you may still have no reconciliation, your in-laws may still think you are the main problem, your sister may still blame you for taking all your parents affection and attention, your friend may never speak to you again and that misunderstanding will not get uncoiled, but you will change. Rather than having a debate in your head against your adversary while you are driving alone, making awesome succinct points of why you are right and they are wrong, wrong, wrong... take that time to pray for them. For it is only in this act of love that you can right the wrongs in your life, there is no other better

alternative.

You may think that this is the passive way out, but it is not. Listen to the entire two verses of the proverb once again, ““If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you”. When you love your enemy, when you give up your right to get back at someone who deserves to be punished, you give room for God. Hear the word, the Lord will reward you—he will not create the exact situation that you desire but he will create room in your heart so that you can echo Apostle Paul’s declaration:

19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. **20** On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” **21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:19-21)

This past summer I picked up The New York Times Magazine. Christians in the middle East are being forced out of their homes, enslaved and killed. Why is no one coming to their aid (July 26, 2015). In this well written article, Eliza Griswold depicts the plight of the Assyrian Church of the East in which entire Christian villages of 40,000 people are massacred by ISIS. The crisis is so dire but the help so void that militia groups have been formed. “A few of these militias are aided by a handful of American, Canadian and British citizens, who, frustrated with their governments’ lack of response to ISIS, have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight on their own. Some come in the name of fellow Christians. Some come to relive their roles in the United States invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan—or make amends for them. This is a picture of Raed Sabah Matt’s bullet wounded arm. He is a former member of the Iraqi Army who survived an attack by Al Qaeda in Mosul and is now a member of an anti-ISIS Christian militia. But the battle with guns is a losing battle, when you think you have to break away from being passive and become aggressive in your method of dealing with the enemy, the end result is simply more destruction. Rev. Emanuel Youkhana, the head of Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq, says, “for the first time in 2,000 years, there are no church services in Mosul.”

God doesn’t call us to be passive and to give up whenever we face world crisis—which truly is our default mode and so we read articles such as this. God also doesn’t want us to become aggressive that we leave no room for God to become our Lord, for God to avenge, to be the ultimate judge.

Martin Luther King Junior gave us an example of how to avoid being passive or aggressive but to be assertive in our own personal crisis and in world-wide crisis: he showed us how to love our enemies with dignity. He didn’t fight evil with evil, but girded with the Word of God, he led the civil rights movement in the USA with humility and strength, knowing full well that he was risking his very own life and eventually being assassinated because of his beliefs. In Washington DC, there are monuments honoring this great civil rights leader and in one of the monuments his words are inscribed, “I

believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.”

On the cross our Lord Jesus was temporarily defeated, but in this temporary defeat he triumphed over all evil, and it is with that authority that Jesus spoke to people like Martin Luther King Jr. and he continues to speak to people like you and I. Maybe we are not going to defeat ISIS, but Jesus Christ has already defeated them, or abolish prejudices, but Jesus Christ has already commanded us to love all, or eradicate poverty, but Jesus Christ has already blessed the poor! The one thing you and I are called to today is to look at our own lives, look at our hearts and see what hatred we may be holding on to and give that up to Jesus. We cannot passively ignore it or excuse it, or aggressively tend to it or grow it. We need to assertively give it up to Jesus. For us who follow Jesus, we need to let of our rights temporarily, choose to give room for God to be Lord, and love our enemies. Let us try to right some wrongs. Amen.