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**“The Community of Love”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
September 3, 2017
Romans 12:9-21**

It was August 22, 2005 in a courtroom in Atlanta, Georgia, when Fallon Stubbs forgave her enemy. Stubbs was only 14 when the activist Eric Rudolph set off the Olympic Park pipe bomb which would kill her mother Alice Hawthorne and wound many others. As Rudolph sat before two dozen victims and their family members at his sentencing hearing, he claimed that he would “do anything to take back that night.” Ms. Stubbs sat quietly, listening to him. And then she, who had also been wounded by shrapnel from his bomb, had her chance to speak. She used her time to offer Mr. Rudolph forgiveness. "Because of you," she said, I have become a tolerant person. Not for you, but for me, I forgive you. I look at you. I love you ... and if I cry," she added, "it's not for me. It's not for my mother. It's not for my father. It's for you."

Another victim in that courtroom was Memrie Creswell, a 37-year-old who was injured by Rudolph's bombing at the Otherside Lounge, a gay club in the Atlanta area. Said Ms. Creswell to reporters after the sentencing hearing, "He rolled his eyes when I said that I'm going to trump his evilness with love for the rest of my days."¹

Years later, another murderer, Dylann Roof, stood before the family members of his victims and heard their voices of forgiveness as well:

"I forgive you," Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, said at the hearing, her voice breaking with emotion. "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."

"I acknowledge that I am very angry," said the sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor. "But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family ... is she

¹ Shaila Dewan, "Olympic Bomber Apologizes and Is Sentenced to Life Term," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/23/us/olympics-bomber-apologizes-and-is-sentenced-to-life-terms.html> (9-1-17).

taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul.”²

We’ve heard it before, such professions of forgiveness from one who has been severely emotionally, physically, and mentally damaged toward the one who has done the damage. We aren’t necessarily surprised when we hear such professions, but we often shake our heads and think, “I don’t know if I would have the strength to do that to someone who had hurt or killed someone I love. I don’t know if I have it in me to forgive someone like that, much less love them.” Such a response, after all, flies in the face of our inner desire for retributive justice. When we have been wronged, our gut response is to want the one who has made us suffer to suffer as much as we have. But as followers of Christ, we know that the desire for retributive justice is not the way to peace. It is not the way God calls us to live with one another. Retributive justice runs counter to what Paul writes to the Romans about how they are to live with one another – even their enemies - in love, and goodness, and harmony.

I can’t help but think of the story of Jennifer Thompson and Ronald Cotton. Years ago, Jennifer was raped one horrible night, not far from here. Her life was

² Mark Berman, “‘I forgive you.’ Relatives of Charleston church shooting victims address Dylann Roof,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/19/i-forgive-you-relatives-of-charleston-church-victims-address-dylann-roof/?utm_term=.941cdadb0b24 (9-1-17)

torn apart in that moment. She tried to start to put it back together again when she made a positive identification from a line-up of possible perpetrators. The only problem was, she was wrong. The accused man, Ronald Cotton, spent eleven years in jail before evidence surfaced that would prove his innocence. When it did, Jennifer had to come face-to-face with the fact that her positive ID of this man had been positively wrong. She wept at what she had done to him and how her testimony had cost him eleven years of his life. She asked her lawyer if she could meet him. They met at a church, in a sanctuary, where she could say the words that had been keeping her up at night.

Trembling, she opened the [sanctuary] door. She had prayed for the strength to face this moment. She had prayed for the strength to face this man. "I'm sorry," she said. "If I spent every day for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn't come close to what I feel."

Ronald Cotton was calm and quiet, and Thompson thought he seemed so very tall. Finally, he spoke. "I'm not mad at you," he said softly. "I've never been mad at you. I just want you to have a good life." Tears falling,

Thompson looked into his eyes and knew she would never see him in her nightmares again.³

The two continued to meet regularly and became friends, working together to speak against the death penalty and for DNA evidence to be used in rape cases.

“How did he do it?” we ask. “How could he forgive her?”

The writer of the letters of John knows, “We love because God first loved us.” Jesus says in Luke, “We forgive because we have been forgiven much. We love because we have been shown great love” (Luke 7). Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians that the still more excellent way is the way of love (1 Cor. 12). It is not the easiest way, but it is the way in which we embody the love that has been shown to us in Christ by our gracious and forgiving God.

We’ve had to do a lot of thinking recently about what it means to be divided one from another. We have seen divisions fueled by hatred and fear rear their ugly heads all around us. Many of us can clearly name those which we call “the enemy” and forgiveness and love are often the farthest things from our minds. When we hear this passage, we nod our heads at the beginning, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, etc. etc. When we get to the words, “Be patient in suffering” we squirm a bit in our chairs, but when Paul

³ Helen O’Neill, “The Perfect Witness,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2001, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/node/545>, (9-1-2017).

writes, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” we really get antsy, and maybe even a bit defensive.

And in case we weren't sure exactly what Paul meant by this, he works it out for us: “Live in harmony with one another; Do not repay evil for evil; live peaceably with all; never avenge yourself; 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.” He takes us right back to the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

And the retributive justice-minded among us roll our eyes at one another and say, “You have got to be kidding me.” But Paul knows that Jesus is not kidding and that the well-being of the community and even the well-being of the world depends on our full participation in the call to love our enemies and to overcome evil with good. It works, too, when we get serious about it and seek God's wisdom, strength, and guidance in order to enact it.

A few years ago, a town in Germany got serious (and extremely creative!) about taking Paul's words seriously, if not literally. The town of Wunseidel, in northeast Bavaria was the regular destination for neo-Nazi marches and gatherings. The people in the town had grown weary of the hatred lauded as a part of these marches and had finally had enough. So in 2014, when the marchers came, this

time the townspeople were ready. They planned what many referred to as the first “involuntary walk-a-thon” in Germany. Unbeknownst to the marching neo-Nazis, at least until they began walking, every step they took raised money for programs that fought Nazis. Donors had pledged their money per step ahead of time and the townspeople came out to cheer and thank the marchers for raising money to fight their own cause. Banners welcomed the marchers to the “Nazis-against-Nazis” walk-a-thon. Along the way, the road had been painted with numbers – the amount of money raised at each point - and thank you notes lined the pavement and streets. There were tables filled with bananas “to help them keep up their energy so they could keep walking — and keep raising money” and water-stops lined the course, putting a nice twist on Paul’s command, “if [your enemies] are hungry, give them something to eat; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads” (Rom 12:20).

In this [writes blogger Amy Allen] Paul is not commanding passive submission to the evils of this world, but rather commending a still more excellent way.

In this excellent way, Christians are called not to ignore despair, but to help sow joy in its wake; not to condone hate, but to be all the more zealous in their own loving in its face. The politics of overcoming evil are about

neither ignoring nor condoning evil, but rather, fighting it with the strongest power possible—love.⁴

We cannot be satisfied by the world as it is. We are called to a still more excellent way – the way of love. It is not always a clear way and it is not always an easy way, but as Christians, it is *our* way.

Walter Wink tells the story of love and forgiveness enacted during the height of the civil rights struggle in Selma, Alabama. One night, a large crowd of black and white activists stood together in front of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, singing to pass the time. Suddenly, someone grabbed the microphone and reported that a group of black students demonstrating in Montgomery had been surrounded by police on horseback. The police cornered them and blocked any escape route before taunting them and threatening to make them pay if they did not disperse. The police then began to beat them and for two hours held off ambulances that had come to their aid.

Furious at this news, the crowd sought to find ways to take revenge.

Cries went up: “Let’s march!”

⁴ Amy Allen, “The Politics of Overcoming Evil – Romans 12:9-21,” *Political Theology Today*, August 28, 2017, <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-overcoming-evil-romans-129-21-amy-allen/>, 9-1-17.

Behind us [writes Wink], across the street stood, rank on rank, the Alabama state troopers and the local police forces of Sheriff Jim Clark. The situation was explosive. A young black minister stepped to the microphone and said, “It’s time we sang a song.” He opened with the line, “Do you love Martin King?” “Certainly, Lord!” the crowd responded. “Do you love Martin King?” “Certainly, Lord!” “Do you love Martin King?” “Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!”

Right through the chain of command of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference he went, the crowd each time echoing, warming up to the song, “Certainly, certainly, certainly Lord!” [Then] without warning he sang out, “Do you love Jim Clark?” The sheriff?! “Cer-certainly, Lord” came the stunned, halting reply. “Do you love Jim Clark?” “Certainly, Lord” – it was stronger this time. “Do you love Jim Clark?” Now the point had sunk in: “Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!”

The Reverend James Bevel then took the mike. We are not fighting for our rights, he explained, but for the good of the whole society. “It’s not enough to defeat Jim Clark – do you hear me, Jim? - we want you converted. We cannot win by hating our oppressors. We have to love them into changing.”⁵

⁵ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 176-7.

We have to love them. We have to love them, friends. We have to love them.

Certainly, certainly, certainly Lord.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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