

Courageous Compassion

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Romans 12: 9-23

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.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Teacher, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy inhabitants of the land; be inventive in hospitality.

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.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says the Indwelling Spirit in all things. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if they are thirsty, get them a drink. Your generosity will surprise them with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

On Thursday evening about twelve people from CCC climbed to the top of a mountain to observe the nearly full moon rise over the Oakland Hills. One of the rituals of this group is to howl like wolves at the moon, which we did with reckless abandon. I have a couple of wolf stories for you this morning.

The first one is attributed to Saint Francis. It's a story about a village that was being terrorized by a wolf. Saint Francis is said to have struck up a deal with the wolf. The wolf would stop eating the pets and little children of the village if the townspeople would simply leave a bowl of food out on their doorsteps for the wolf to eat each night. Saint Francis' plan worked.

The second story is entitled "The Wolves Within." An old grandfather told this story to his grandson who was very angry at a friend who had done him an injustice. "Let me tell you a story," said the grandfather. "I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those who have taken so much with no sorrow for what they do; but hate wears me down and does not hurt the other person. It is like taking a poison and wishing the other person would die. I have struggled with these feelings many times." He continued, "It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But the other wolf... Ah! The littlest thing will send him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all of the time, for no reason. And he

cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing. Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to run my life." The boy looked intently into his grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?" The grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."

Which wolf do we feed with our thoughts, habits, and actions: the one who is good and does no harm, lives in harmony with all around him, and does not take offense when no offense was intended? Or the other wolf who fights everyone, all of the time, for no reason? He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing. *The one we feed is the one who wins* is the moral of the story that the grandfather offered to his grandson.

As I reflect upon this grandfather wisdom I also imagine the wise grandson asking another question – something like “Grandfather, what does the wolf who does no harm give to the angry wolf?” At that point I see the grandfather smiling....

The Apostle Paul answers the question in Romans, Chapter 12 when he says:

Let love be genuine. Bless those who persecute you; repay no one evil for evil, and never avenge yourselves. Do not be overcome by hate, but overcome hate with love. For a hateful response to hate only creates more hatred.

It has been amazing to me to see so many places where this courageous compassion is evident.

President Obama welcomed Aung San Suu Kim to the White House as the leader of Myanmar to announce the lifting of some economic sanctions against her country – her country whose military government kept her under house arrest for twenty-five years. She won a Nobel Prize for her leadership of the non-violent movement for democracy in Burma.

In his book, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, John Philip Newell, a teacher of Celtic Spirituality, shares the wisdom of Aung San Suu Kyi:

Suu Kyi describes the movement for change that she is leading as a “revolution of the Spirit.” True power, she says, comes from within. What guides her is the way of compassion, being with the suffering. She has compassion for her people in their suffering, and she extends her compassion to the leaders of Burma’s military dictatorship, saying, “If I had really started hating my captors I would have defeated myself.” Hatred and fear blinds us to the wisdom in our soul.

John Philip Newell describes Suu Kyi’s threefold path of compassion as

The courage to see.

The courage to feel.

And the courage to act.

To live with courageous compassion is to:

see the connection between ourselves and those who suffer,
allow ourselves to feel it,
and then to courageously take responsibility for those who suffer.

Another example of courageous compassion are the Native Americans protesting at Standing Rock in North Dakota. In their words, “They think we own the land, but we know that we belong to the land.” The Native Americans had hoped that forty people would show up, but the gathering has grown into an encampment where tribes from all over the country and as far away as Ecuador have joined.

I want to give attention to these signs of courageous compassion because this coming Wednesday is the International Day of Peace, which was founded by the United Nations in 1981. In 2002 the General Assembly officially declared September 21st as the permanent date for the International Day of Peace. By creating the International Day of Peace, the U.N. devoted itself to worldwide peace and encouraged all of mankind to work in cooperation for this goal. During the discussion of the U.N. resolution that established the International Day of Peace, it was suggested that:

Peace Day should be devoted to commemorating and strengthening the ideals of peace both within and among all nations and peoples.... This day will serve as a reminder to all peoples that our organization is a living instrument in the service of peace and should serve all of us here within the organization as a constantly pealing bell reminding us that our permanent commitment, above all interests or differences of any kind, is to peace.

The International Day of Peace is also a Day of Ceasefire – *personal or political*. Take this opportunity to make peace in your own relationships as well as impact the larger conflicts of our time. Declare a personal ceasefire with someone, some group, and some candidate in the world that you can touch. Imagine what a whole Day of Ceasefire would mean to humankind, in Syria, in our cities, in ourselves.

In this passage from Romans, Paul has some words of advice for us that become agents of peace and reconciliation.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be inventive in hospitality. Surprise your enemies with goodness.

And Alice Walker adds “Cultivate happiness, find time for rest and play, and if you or someone else is angry, see if you can find the source in fear, humiliation, or pain, and respond to that.”

Feed the good wolf with courage, and the frightened wolf with compassion. And don't forget to howl at the moon on a monthly basis, with friends.