

Revolutionary Thinking

Peter JB Carman, Binkley Baptist Church

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Isaiah 51:1-6

Romans 12:1-21

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

I have just come home from a whirlwind tour of family and friends, on the longest fastest vacation Lynn and I have taken in a few years! It may not sound to exciting to you—three weeks of visiting family and friends. The thing is, these friends were scattered across Germany, northern Italy and the Netherlands.

I quote a good friend of Lynn from Stuttgart, Germany, a dear friend she hadn't seen in eighteen years. “So how long are you going to be in Italy?” (The next stage of our journey) Response: “Oh, it's really silly. Only three days, all of them with friends in the town of Cento, near Bologna.” Lynn's friend: “They get you for three days, and I get only twenty hours?” It's great to be warmly welcomed all across Europe! Also to laugh from nation to nation.

Despite some sightseeing at the insistence of our friends, mostly we were there for visiting, catching up. I got to swap spiritual insights with my genuine Dutch uncle; play hide and seek with children in the main square of an Italian village and in an old castle courtyard; see how young cousins have grown. We got to *eat* our way across Europe, moving from house to house, from kuchen to pasta to nasi goreng to fish soup, concluding with, well guess—Barbeque, Dutch style. And we talked together...a lot.

Now with a few notable exceptions, most of our friends and relatives live at arm's length from churches. So, honestly, vacation was a refreshing break that way too, for one tired preacher. It was great hearing spiritual journeys on the *other* side, as it were. And yet it also meant three weeks of getting to see Christianity from the outside, through the eyes of folks who just haven't been too excited about the institutional forms Church has taken where they live- or anywhere, from what they have seen.

From the outside, so often the Church looks like a rigid and ancient set of institutions, more tied to preserving a traditional social order than to a radical love ethic. The stories of folk's interactions with Christianity more often center on some negative encounter with a clergy person, or some petty conflict between church members, than they do with the teachings of Jesus, or with reversing the relationship between rich and poor, or with walking in the way of justice and nonviolence. The integrity of St. Francis gets lost amid the machinations of bureaucracy.

And so I come back to you this morning, with a sharp new resolution. I have got, *we* have got, to start getting the message out there that there are some live alternatives to the moribund and narrow forms that Christianity has too often taken.

This morning's scripture passages, particular our reading from the Gospel according to the Apostle Paul, lend themselves nicely to the task of reclaiming Christian faith as a radical alternative to status quo politics, status quo social norms, status quo consumerism and status quo spirituality. If we were to sum up the twelfth chapter of the letter to the Rome in two words, it might be these: Revolutionary Thinking. Paul is calling the followers of Christ to dare to be what the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. almost two millennia later referred to as “Transformed Nonconformists.” Don't let your minds and hearts be shaped by the assumptions, the traditions, the practices of this age, Paul encourages the followers of Jesus. Be “transformed by the renewal of your mind”. For Paul this takes rather radical form! First he dares those new disciples to come together in harmony in bodies of people who share, each bringing the particular gifts that are unique to them, and trusting the others to use their gifts too! That means giving up mistrust, giving up the need to control all the outcomes. It means daring to be part of a movement bigger than our own rugged individualism!

Then Paul reminds his readers of another revolutionary way of thinking. He plants the seeds of the gospel of nonviolence. We all live, he allows, in a world which is a seemingly endless spiral of getting even, of pushing our own needs at one another's expense, spiraling up to a never ending cycle of vengeful violence. It is up to the followers of Christ, he proposes, to show a more excellent way. He pitches into a series of teachings that is a manifesto for revolutionary thinking and revolutionary living, a whole new approach that begins with the heart and reaches implicitly all the way through family to church to neighborhood to the business of nations. Paul asks us to do some really hard things. And some wonderful things. [Read vv. 14-21].

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Give up competing with your neighbors—try simplicity and humility on for size. Give up vengeance! No more tit for tat, no more getting even. Try a different way! And the final line, “DO not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Someone, Paul is saying, needs to interrupt the cycle. And that would be thee and me.

Revolutionary thinking? Surely not original thinking! This document has been around—and read aloud, for a very long time. Truths that have been repeated for two thousand years without conviction, recited but rarely tried, become as conventional and boring as those who parrot them. We have been hearing the summons to revolutionary thinking, to live by the law of love rather than vengeance, solidarity rather than competition, modesty rather than self-seeking arrogance, for two thousand years! It isn’t original anymore! People are used to the churches talking that way, and then going and acting another. They hardly listen! It isn’t original.

And yet I read somewhere recently a quote from C. S Lewis: “Even in literature and art, no [one] who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.”

The question is how do follow the spiritual movement trajectory of folk like Martin Luther King Jr., or Archbishop Romero, or Dorothy Day, or so many more witnesses across the centuries? How do we begin to talk and walk and live out this path of amazing nonviolent love, this insistence on standing with those who suffer, laughing with those who laugh.... How do we manage to re-write the book on Christianity? What is *our* witness to this revolutionary way—this ancient but still fresh and dangerous way—of thinking, of acting, of being in the world?

We need to allow the message to capture our imaginations: start to imagine what our personal world would look like, if we reverse the usual cycles, break out of the usual back and forth, set ourselves free from the desires to compete and rise and succeed. For those of us who are used to suffering quietly, passively—the questions may be even more challenging! What would it mean to be creatively nonviolent instead of being carpets for violence?

So many questions for the imagination: What would it be like to really offer my gifts? What would it mean to become deeply appreciative of the gifts of others close to me, rather than take them for granted? Allow the soul to be transformed by the renewal of the mind—what might we change in the world if we were to start living and talking and breathing, in a systematic way, that path of nonviolent transformation?

Once we have begun imagining, have been captured by the revolutionary vision, then we dare to experiment with our own lives—starting small in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our church. Try it out, start to ask the questions, start the revolution internally and close at hand. Try looking at your children in a new way! See your parents with fresh eyes. Acknowledge the places of pain...dare to start a new story, rather than continuing the endless cycle of the old! Insist on hope. Abandon cynicism.

As we begin to imagine, begin to experiment in our own spirits and the world around us, I suspect we will soon dare to think big, at least think bigger. Let us not underestimate the revolutionary potential and power of the message of Christ’s love! We are not on our own in this. We need not to be overwhelmed by the evil of our own times, but to start believing again that within humanity there lies the possibility of goodness. Believing that is risky. Living it is riskier. Failing to try it is, however a self-fulfilling and desperate reality.

The world today is in need of folk who are willing to risk the revolutionary thinking of a generous nonviolent faith. Whether in the halls of Congress, the living rooms of Chapel Hill or the neighborhoods of Durham, whether in Europe or Asia or Africa or right here, it is urgent that we claim the revolutionary call of the gospel of love and justice! And yet it can’t start with politics, or theories. It has to start with imagination. It has to start with some prayer! It has to start with some vision and some hope. It has to start with the transformation of hearts and the renewal of minds.

May God grant us all these, beginning with a fresh glimpse of our own place in the movement toward a new creation, springing up amid the ashes of the old. There is a revolution coming! This one starts small, starts within...starts here.