

SERMON: Overcoming Evil
TEXT: Romans 12:9-21

8-30-2020

A number of years ago I read a book titled, *Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words*. In 1953, she started out from Los Angeles, California, with a goal of walking across the country for the cause of peace. She achieved that goal, and made the pilgrimage nearly six more times, until she was killed - riding in a car on the way to a speaking engagement - in 1981. She was known only by the name, Peace Pilgrim, as she wanted to promote the message and not the messenger. The book begins with this introduction.

You may see her walking through your town or along the highway - a silver-haired woman dressed in navy blue slacks and shirt, and a short tunic with pockets all around the bottom in which she carries her only worldly possessions. It says, "PEACE PILGRIM" in white letters on the front of the tunic and "25,000 Miles on Foot for Peace" on the back. She has walked the 25,000 miles. However, she continues to walk, for her vow is, "I shall remain a wanderer until mankind has learned the way of peace, walking until I am given shelter and fasting until I am given food." She walks without a penny in her pockets and she is not affiliated with any organization. She walks as a prayer and as a chance to inspire others to

pray and work with her for peace. She speaks to individuals along the way, to gatherings such as church groups or college groups, through newspapers, magazines, radio, television - relating interesting and meaningful experiences, discussing peace within and without. She feels we have learned that war is not the way to peace - that security does not lie in stockpiles of bombs. She points out that this is a crisis period in human history, and that we who live in the world today must choose between a nuclear war of annihilation and a golden age of peace. Although she does not ask to see results, thousands of letters testify that her journey has not been in vain - saying, in effect, "Since talking with you I've decided that I should be doing something for peace also."

Her story is true. And her book is a compilation of her own writings, as well as transcripts from interviews, articles, and letters from others. I've started reading it again, as we are in yet another crisis period in human history which cries out for her example of humility and selflessness.

Today's scripture reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans is one that she refers to several times throughout the book.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” Genuine, sincere, honest love can be hard to find some days. We are so deeply divided in our country that we spew hateful words at anyone who disagrees with us. We assume the worst about people rather than believing that there is something good in everyone.

One commentary pointed out that the word *hate* is not nearly strong enough to express the real meaning of the Greek word Paul used. But I feel like *hate* in our language even sounds angry. To say it makes our brows furrow and our jaws clench and our muscles tense, conjuring up feelings of anger in us.

Peace Pilgrim wrote, “In my work I have chosen the positive approach. I never think of myself as protesting against something, but rather as *witnessing for* harmonious living. Those who witness *for*, present solutions. Those who witness *against*, usually do not - they dwell on what is wrong, resorting to judgment and criticism and sometimes even name-calling. Naturally, the negative approach has a detrimental effect on the person who uses it, while the positive approach has a good effect.... The positive approach inspires; the negative approach [brings anger]. When you make people angry, they act in accordance with their baser

instincts, often violently and irrationally. When you inspire people, they act in accordance with their higher instincts, sensibly and rationally. Also, anger is transient, whereas inspiration sometimes has a life-long effect.”

Paul wrote, “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

When asked a question about the biggest problem in the world, Peace Pilgrim answered, “The number one world problem is immaturity. We choose to live at a small fraction of our real potential. In our immaturity we are greedy: some grab more than their share so that others starve. In our immaturity we are fearful: we build up armaments against one another, resulting in war. If we work on world problems, we usually work at the level of symptom. I have chosen to work primarily at the level of removing cause.”

“Bless those who persecute you,” Paul wrote. “Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with

one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Peace Pilgrim told this story. “During my travels a saloon-keeper called me into his tavern to give me some food, and while I was eating he asked, *How do you feel in a place like this?* ‘I know that all human beings are God’s children,’ I replied. ‘Even when they are not acting that way, I have faith that they could, and I love them for what they could be.’ ...I see in all creatures the reflection of God. All people are my kinfolk - people to me are beautiful!”

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

“Once I was hit by a disturbed teenage boy whom I had taken for a walk,” wrote Peace Pilgrim. “Everyone was afraid to go with him. He was a great big fellow and looked like a football player, and he was known to be violent at times. He had once beaten his mother so badly that she had to spend several weeks in the hospital.” Everything was going fine until a thunderstorm came along. He was terrified. “Suddenly he went off the beam and came for me, hitting at me. But even while he was hitting me I could only feel the deepest compassion for him.... I bathed his hatred with love... As a result the hitting stopped. He said, *You didn't hit back! Mother always hits back.* [Soon] he experienced remorse and complete self-condemnation. What are a few bruises on my body in comparison with the transformation of a human life? To make a long story short he was never violent again. He is a useful person in this world today.”

Of course, this woman was extraordinary in her life of selflessness and discipline. Some would say she was foolish and naive. But the point is that she truly lived what she believed. “A pilgrimage is a gentle journey of prayer and example,” she wrote. “My walking is first of all a prayer for peace. If you give your life as a prayer you intensify the prayer beyond all measure.”

This list of virtues that Paul wrote to the Romans gives us a picture of a true Christian and the humble response to the gift of grace. These are ways in which we build up community. These are the ways each one of us can work toward OVERCOMING EVIL in the world. May we pray for the strength to live accordingly... to the glory of God!

AMEN.