I Thessalonians 5:15-18

*the way of goodness*

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Roy W. Howard

It was difficult to listen to Andy Parker the day after his daughter Alison Parker and her colleague Adam Ward were murdered on live television. His heart, split wide open and bleeding with grief, was exposed for all see. But I did listen and will continue to listen to him and others like them – out of respect for their loss. The least I can do is listen to them and to Gabby Giffords; to the parents of those children slain at Sandy Hook, and the congregation in Charleston, and all those whose grief is a call to call to courage and goodness.

Our text says, “*See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all*.” Andy Parker is a father whose heart is broken with sorrow I can’t fathom. I get that; but what struck me the most was what he said at the end. “I will do whatever it takes to bring some good out of this evil.” His disposition is precisely what our text is urging upon us: resisting the impulse to trade evil for evil by countering it with goodness. Andy and his wife Barbara have no illusions about the cost of resisting evil by doing good; neither should we. Yet to forsake the high cost of doing good cheapens human life to a level that is unsustainable for anyone. When innocent children fleeing from war wash up on the shores of another country, we see what happens when doing good is forsaken. Life becomes cheap, evil flourishes.

*See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.*

I was walking the Camino de Santiago when nine people were murdered during a Bible study at the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston. My fellow pilgrims and I shook our heads in shock, before we bowed them in prayer. The killer said he wanted to start a race war. The man who killed Alison Parker and Adam Ward only two months later said he was obliged to respond. This is how evil repays evil. And, of course, they both had access to the guns that allowed them to do such evil. These horrible facts make the gut wrenching speech of Andy Parker so necessary for to hear. “I will do whatever it takes, so that good comes from this evil.” Would that we all have the courage of our convictions to do the same.

Repaying evil for evil is the standard way of the world. What unsettles that way is the Christian practice that refuses to repay evil for evil. Many were disturbed by the response of the Charleston church members and community leaders who proclaimed forgiveness and non-retaliation in the pursuit of justice. But the Church and its supporters remain adamant in their desire to do good and sustain a common life of one community. Others, in their anger, want something stronger, less forgiving; as do crazed killers of police officers in the line of duty. The exchange of evil for evil is a deadly toxic force that consumes everyone in its orbit. Saint Paul knows this toxic power when he says, “*flee from evil and cling to what is good*.”

It’s been nearly ten years since a killer with guns entered a one room Amish school in Lancaster County Pennsylvania. Many have forgotten that five children were gunned down that day before the killer shot himself. But we who want to practice the Christian faith should not forget the example of that community. Not only did they refuse evil by proclaiming forgiveness in the pursuit of reconciliation, they also embraced the deranged killer’s wife and children, helping them to put their lives back together again in their beloved community.

Fleeing from evil and doing good is the consequence of a lifetime of training in the Christian faith. Who knows when you will be called to act in the face of a similar horror? When the murderous jihadist was restrained on a French commuter train, it was by three men who put their lives at risk to save others. Goodness appears in many forms. When police in riot gear stood in the rubble of Baltimore, someone organized children to bring them bottles of water. Goodness appears in many forms.

Here is crucial thing to remember.

The summons to non-retaliation and doing good is based on ***God's action*** toward the world made visible in the life of Jesus. When given the chance to respond with evil to those who did evil to him, God-in-flesh refused. Instead while hanging from a cross and bearing the marks of their torture Jesus called upon his Father to forgive them. This is the heart of the Christian story in action. By his resurrection Jesus lives among us in his Spirit enabling us to practice a way of life that reflects his own way of non-retaliation and doing good to all people.

Without this understanding of God's story - the story that shows us God's wide mercy in Jesus Christ- the summons appears to be an impossible moral demand. Yet this is precisely what the Christian story says: ***rather than return evil for evil, God chose goodness toward all people.*** This goodness is outrageous grace and it looks like Jesus' life.

When Saint Paul says repay no one evil for evil and to seek to do good, he is urging us to imitate Jesus' way in a shattered world that knows more about returning evil for evil than sharing goodness and receiving grace.

Let us practice the way of goodness.

Amen.