

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

The Answer to Evil

Mar 1, 2015

**Ps 22:23-31 & 2 Thess 3:1-5 – Text = 2 Thess 3:5
(563, 548, 530, 556)**

I've been surprised and delighted
during this year of studying Paul
at how well he understands
the modern insights of neuroscience.

You see, Paul is convinced
that human beings can change.
No matter who they are,
no matter what they have done in the past,
no matter what horrendous impact
their past actions have done,
human beings can change.

It happened to and within him.
It can happen to and within anyone.
And, of greater importance in his message,
God wants it to happen to and within everyone.

Paul is acutely sensitive to the evil that surrounds him.
He was part of it for years and it is very real for him.

In his particular case,
it was a complex mix of evils.
He made an idol of a particular way of seeing things
and living in the world.

He was so devoted to and immersed in
the Shammaite school of the Pharisees.
This was a school or party of zealous Jews.
Here's how NT Wright describes them:

*... zealous for God, zealous for the Law,
ready to go anywhere and do anything,
up to and including violence,
that would achieved the longed-for liberty,
the long-awaited Kingdom of God.*

They were the hard liners on the far right in their culture,
the ones who would enslave, beat, and execute
anyone who did not agree with their narrow and extreme views.

I've been paying particular attention to the news this week –
on the radio, on the TV, on the internet, on the screen, on the stage.
It's been filled with this kind of evil
on the rise in every corner of the globe.

It's easy to be overwhelmed by it.
It's disturbing to realize how pervasive and powerful it is.
It's distressing to discover how much of it
resides within our own hearts and minds.

All of that Paul knew better than most.

But there was something else at work in Paul's life,
just as there is something else at work in ours.

It's what he points to in our text this morning –
"the love of God" and "the steadfastness of Christ."
The Greek word Paul uses here for 'steadfastness' is *hypomeme*.
It means to endure in the face of opposition,
to stay alive in the face of evil,
to stand fast in the service of faith, hope, and love.

Those three notes – faith, hope, and love -
those three notes are the chord chart of Paul's transformation.
Living that chord chart of faith, hope, and love
is what God enabled in Paul's relationship with Jesus Christ.
His encounter with the reality of Jesus as the Christ,
as the decisive act of God in saving the world,
transformed him in ways he could hardly imagine.
Indeed, his letters reflect his struggles
to make sense of this new way of seeing things,
of this redemption (re-deeming or re-seeing) given to him by God
in Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The impact of that encounter with the living Christ,
the power of the transformation that emerged from that relationship,
lies behind and sings through every word that Paul wrote,
every sentence that has come down to us
through the faithful, hopeful, and loving witness of the church
over the centuries.

None of those words
resonate so positively with our hopes and dreams as those of our text this morning.

*May the Lord direct your hearts
to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.*

It is God who is in control here
and Paul prays that his readers and listeners will be open to that influence.
As they discover God's presence at the core of their beings,
in their hearts, as Paul's contemporaries understood the dynamic,
they respond in gratitude and loyalty
to the faith, hope, and love that has been revealed to be
within them and among them.

It's important in reading Paul to remember
that the dynamics of faith he witnesses to and explains
are not simply individual, but communal in nature.
Paul is writing to encourage and instruct
the community that is the body of Christ
continuing his mission of blessing in the world.

That transformation, what scientists today call neuroplasticity,
the possibility of a profound and lasting change in how we show up in the world,
was on display this past Sunday night during the Academy Awards
in the performance and the win for 'Glory' as the best song.
It's from the movie *Selma* about the voters' rights march in 1965.

*We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through
Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany
Now we right the wrongs in history
No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy
Welcome to the story we call victory
Comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory*

Paul knows, in the vitalizing vibration of every healthy cell of his being,
that this glory or energy is within the church community and within him.
It is the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ
given to us to enable us to stand up against evil.
That is Paul's answer to the reality of evil – love and hold fast to faith and hope.
And Paul's answer can be ours.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far
more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*