

“RESISTING EVIL”

Romans 12:9-18; Hebrews 12:1-4, 12-16

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Before I had kids, I was sure that I'd never use the TV as a babysitter, bribe my children with chocolate, or give in to whining and pleading. The reality of parenting changed my perspective considerably! It turned out that saying “no” over and over again is hard, and sometimes it just didn't seem as important as getting through the day. Sometimes the path of least resistance was ... irresistible. Fortunately, children have a remarkable ability to survive and transcend a far bit of less-than-perfectly consistent parenting! In the scheme of things, sometimes going with the flow makes for a simpler, more grace-filled life.

But there are other times when we choose the path of least resistance when the results are less benign - when what we give up is integrity and faithfulness, or the opportunity to do good or avert harm.

We do this in big ways and small ways, all kinds of ways:

We too readily accept cultural ideas about what is funny, how we should look, what we are supposed to want, who matters and who doesn't.

We've kept quiet when we know we should've said “That's not funny.”
“That's not fair.”
“That's not true.”
“I don't agree.”

We've acquiesced to social and political realities as well as relationship dynamics and behaviors from others that are destructive, inequitable, even violent.

In church, we read the easiest and most comforting parts of our scriptures the most often, and kind of skirt around the challenging passages.

Much of the time, we figure it's just too much work to stay informed about issues or to think them through from a biblical and faith perspective, and often too hard – or controversial – to discuss them.

We feel kind of relieved sometimes, truth be told, to think that, since we have little power and few resources, there is no point in expending energy or money or time trying to change anything.

We tell ourselves that it's just the way things are. It's the way of the world. It's human nature. You can't change it. It's always been like this and always will be. We distance ourselves from concerns that (we tell ourselves) don't have anything to do with us.

We don't like to rock the boat, make waves, upset the apple cart, make a scene (it's interesting how many clichés we have to describe this!) even when we know that something

isn't quite as it should be. We ignore the dissonance and opt for going along, even if the unity is superficial and the compromise damaging to our souls. And so we allow ourselves to get more and more comfortable with things we shouldn't be comfortable with.

I hate to say it, but I've begun to think that we in the church have gotten a little ... lazy in our faith. It's not that we don't do a lot of good (and hard) work to support one another and help people and share God's love. But when I remember the churches that played a leading role in the civil rights movement, the Confessing Church in Germany that refused to support the Nazis, the Protestant reformers who argued passionately for sound theology and the priesthood of all believers, the early Christians who refused to recognize the Roman emperor as divine... I think maybe we have gotten a bit morally, spiritually, and intellectually complacent.

We want our religion to make us feel good but not ask too much of us. We don't like change. We don't want to give up our comforts. We don't want to think too hard. We don't want to have to struggle for understanding. We don't spend much time examining how our beliefs and our actions are or aren't consistent with God's call. We sometimes let "polite" and "nice" have more importance than "true" or "just." And we certainly don't want to offend any of our friends, or anybody important, or any of the big givers, or, really, anybody at all.

We like the path of least resistance.

But this isn't what we're called to. Paul writes to the church at Rome: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you can discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The writer of Hebrews urges Christians to persevere, to not lose heart, to put our hands to work and to walk the walk. And don't be like Esau, he says, who sold out his identity for one quick meal.

The path of least resistance doesn't always claim us just like that; but it can, over time, lead us to trading an identity as Jesus' people for an identity not rooted in the gospel. It's not necessarily as sudden as Esau's capitulation, and it isn't always intentional.

For example:

Over the years we have been told, and believed, a lot of things:

Girls aren't good at math.¹

DDT is safe.²

Slavery was an aberration in our country's history as a beacon of freedom and justice for all.³

Poor people are lazy, and living high on the hog on government benefits.⁴

Our legal system insures justice for everyone.⁵

Single mothers chose to give up their babies because they knew they couldn't give them a good life.⁶

Young adults will come back to church after they have kids.⁷

Crime is at an all-time high.⁸

People can be "converted" from being gay.⁹

The Bible promises prosperity to those who believe.¹⁰

Not a single one of those things was ever supported by evidence. Yet these – and plenty of other equally questionable propositions - were, or still are, all widely believed. Mostly, I think, because somebody, and then more somebodies, repeated them until they sounded familiar, and familiar feels true. But believing things just because we've heard them repeated until they sound familiar is taking the path of least resistance when we should instead be asking questions, using our minds, seeking understanding, engaging our empathy, and exercising some skepticism.

Going down that particular path of least resistance leads us to act (or fail to act) in ways that have hurtful consequences. It often leads to more lies, to excuses, rationales, and justifications for things that are not compatible with the gospel we claim to believe.

Sometimes we actually know what is true, but choose denial in the face of uncomfortable truths because it is easier not to know about things like white privilege, substance abuse, depression, poverty, or the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and violence. If we stay unaware (or deny that these kinds of issues exist) then we can avoid responsibility to address them.

One of the things saddest things that I've heard in the context of many recent revelations of sexual harassment in various workplaces is the frequent admission that "it was common knowledge." But silence allowed abuse to go on.

This happened in churches too, sad to say, often, with every bit as much denial, because denial seemed easier than the truth, less painful, less disturbing to our view of ourselves. It was the path of least resistance, and it turned out to be a dead end. Because that unacknowledged evil and failure to do justice ate away at community and trust and faith. And because only honesty makes room for healing and change to begin.

That's true in an organization like a church; it's equally true on a personal level or on a societal level.

Nobody seems to know who first said that "all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing," but we know it's true.

Now, I know we don't have a lot of power.

We don't even have the *ear* of people in power.

We don't have resources enough to make a big impact on our community or world with innovative projects and programs.

But we can do some things. We are called to be steadfast and brave in the service of truth and the work of love, in the name of Jesus. And with the help of God's Spirit to discern the way and give us strength and courage, we can resist the beliefs and behaviors undermine truth and community.

Here are just a few random ideas on how we might take up this responsibility of resistance:

- Resist spiritual, moral, and intellectual laziness. Be bold to ask: is that true? Why is that? Is it right? Is it just? How does it help? Is there a better way? What does this do to our souls?

What would Jesus do? Read. Listen (especially to the voices of the vulnerable). Pray. Remember that our faith is supposed to be a comfort to us. But it's not intended just to *make us comfortable*. It's supposed to grow us, enlarge our vision, lead us to wisdom, deepen our compassion.

- Resist simplistic answers to big questions and complex problems. Seek real understanding and support real, multifaceted solutions that put people, especially vulnerable people.
- Resist the increasingly common but lazy and dangerous habit of labelling people with vague but essentially meaningless epithets – “great,” “losers,” “idiot,” “animals.” Practice stating clearly the ideas, words, or behaviors you find offensive or praiseworthy.
- Resist false equivalencies: Somebody promoting white superiority isn't “doing just the same thing” as someone protesting housing discrimination.
- Resist the messages of advertising and entertainment that tell you that you aren't good enough; remember that you are a child of God.
- Resist hate; resist stereotyping; resist the temptation to minimize the suffering of others; resist anything that makes vulnerable people more vulnerable.
- Resist fear as a motivation. Fear tends to lead to hate. Love is not only a more constructive place to begin; it is more powerful.
- Resist the message that there is nothing you can do to change things. Resist isolation. Choose to be in community. Join your voice and actions with others; there are all kinds of ways to do this. Let's talk.

I know a lot of us have done – are doing, or trying to do – many of these things. But we haven't, I think, as the writer of Hebrews says, “resisted to the point of shedding blood.” Yikes, does it really say that?! We don't really want to go there, do we? But there's truth here. Our resistance often gives way as it gets a little difficult – when an issue is complicated, friends don't understand, some long-cherished idea is threatened, speaking up is risky, we might have to sacrifice.

So where do we find the strength?

We find it right here.

At the table,
where we are fed from divine love -
all of us, equally, no one “above” or more worthy than anyone else.

Here we are fed not just with bread and juice
but with and a vision of a new reality of inclusion
forgiveness
compassion
honesty
and justice.

Here we are nurtured by the experience of community and strengthened to resist evil in all its forms.

Here we are invited to be more than passive consumers of comfortable religion; we are called and empowered to be, instead, participants in a gospel movement of radical love and inclusive justice. Come to the table. And then go out into the world.

Amen.

¹ “The Myth of the Math Gender Gap,” *Time*, July 24, 2008

² Centers for Disease Control; Environmental Protection Agency

³ “Slavery Made America,” *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2014

⁴ Only 25% of people eligible for housing assistance receive any. (*Evicted*, Matthew Desmond). The average TANF payment in Michigan in 2016 was \$352. In the most generous state, Alaska, TANF provides just \$923 a month for a single parent family of three. In the least generous, Alabama, it is just \$170 a month. See also worldvisionusprograms.org

⁵ *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stephenson; Equal Justice Initiative (eji.org)

⁶ *The Girls Who Went Away*, Ann Fessler

⁷ A 2013 Hope College study found that 70 per cent of church participants leave the church as young adults, and only half of them return at some later point. Catholic surveys indicate that 2/3 of young adults raised as Catholics no longer identify with the Catholic faith; only 13 per cent said they it was likely they would ever return.

⁸ “Crime May Be Near an All-time Low” bloomberg.org, February, 2018

⁹ *Psychology Today*, January 31, 2018

¹⁰ Amos 5:11-24, Matthew 6:24; Matthew 19:21-24 and parallels Luke 1:52-53, Luke 4:18, Luke 6:24 Luke 12:16-21; Luke 18:22, James 2:2-5, Revelation 3:17