

Overcome evil with good

This is a troubled and fearful time for the world. The recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Lebanon, and over the Sinai; the uncontained butchery of ISIS in Syria and Iraq; and the mass migration of millions seeking refuge from these horrors leave us bewildered, overwhelmed, afraid. It does feel as if we are in the midst of an unconventional third world war.

This is an equally troubled and confusing time for the Church. As people of faith, we continue to be overcome with waves of grief, compassion and disbelief. Our natural response—informed by centuries of experience and nurtured by those who have taught us well—is to turn to God in prayer. We pray for all those who suffer as a result of these relentless acts of violence. We pray God will comfort the families and friends who knew the victims, loved them, and love them still. We pray for the police, first responders, military personnel, and government officials who seek to bring order, security, and safety to the chaos. We pray for all those, especially the children, feeling a sense of vulnerability, isolation, insecurity, and chronic fear. We pray for the Prince of Peace to reign in the hearts of all persons.

But, we long to do more than pray. We also have a natural instinct, as people of faith, to put our faith into action. We desperately want to understand and embrace what is our unique mission and witness in these days.

Paul's letter to the Church in Rome has been helpful to me. When Paul passed through the gates of Rome, he found himself in the most powerful empire on earth—yet, an empire under attack from within and without. In this context, he names the marks of the true Christian and gives us a framework for our faithful witness to Jesus' transforming love, grace, peace, and justice. Read again and take to heart these hauntingly fresh words:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 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.

Bless those who persecute you; 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. 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.”

Romans 12:9-21 NRSV

These are ancient words. But they could have been written on September 12, 2001, or November 15, 2015. These words challenged the prevailing culture of their day. And, they continue to be prophetic and counter-cultural in our day. When many want to close our doors to refugees, we are called to extend hospitality to strangers. When many want to condemn or label all Muslims as Jihadists, we are called to hate what is evil, but hold fast to what is good and outdo one another in honoring the personhood and worth of all of God's children. When many want to repay evil with evil, we are called to seek another way and to overcome evil with good.

This is a difficult standard to witness to live by and witness to when gripped by real fear and the real need to secure our safety. After 9/11, President Bush told our nation that we were engaged in a war between fear and freedom. The same refrain was echoed by leaders across the world following the terrorist attacks in Paris last week. But, I believe we are now engaged in a much greater, less visible, but equally urgent struggle. We are in a struggle. **We are in a struggle to not lose our soul as the Church of Christ.**

We are in a struggle to combat what is evil, but not let evil fill our hearts.

We are in a struggle to end the violence, but not let violence become our way of life.

We are in a struggle to end terrorism, but not become terrorists in the process.

We are in a struggle to be vigilant, but not let fear curtail our hospitality.

We are in a struggle to be peacemakers, and to let it begin within our own spirits.

And, so I pray: Gracious God, Prince of Peace, Healer of the Nations, Harbinger of Hope, Great Shepherd of Our Souls, calm our troubled, fearful, and grieving spirits. Grant us the wisdom, strength, courage, and humbleness of heart to always choose your path; to always choose to overcome evil with good; to always place our trust in you; to always choose peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.