

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Approaches Difficulties in the Opposite Spirit"
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Restorative Justice Week

Years ago in 1999, we took a kind of sabbatical, although only a three month long one. We went to Youth With A Mission which is one of the largest non-denominational mission organizations with tens of thousands of missionaries, many young, many not so young. Although the first base of operations was in Switzerland fifty years ago or so, we went to the one that was on the big island of Hawaii near Kailua Kona. I recommend a visit to the island someday, if you haven't been there. It is one of the few places in the world to have 7 of the 9 biomes, including both desert and a snowy mountain. In fact, you can ski in the morning and go to the beach in the afternoon, if you are so inclined.

But this is just an introduction to one of the biblical teachings that this particularly organization teaches. It is when you come across a difficulty or challenge in your life or in your relationships, then pursue that challenge in the opposite spirit. Jesus taught that we are to love our enemies. When someone insults us, we are to respond with kindness. Now we have to be careful that we hold our boundaries and not merely submit to abuse, but rather, where we are able, we are to practice love and truth, even in the midst of unkindness and lies.

If we encounter impatience, we need to patiently respond. Where there are power and control issues, we often can offer the situation back into God's hands and even have the ability to serve where we have been disrespected. Jesus mentions in the Luke 21 passage that there are times coming when Christians will be imprisoned, hated, betrayed, persecuted and arrested just because of speaking about our faith and the good news of who Jesus Christ truly is. These days have been upon us for a long time now. And they are not getting better in this country. The media does not pay much attention to persecution of Christians in many countries around the world, nor to the numbers of those tortured and killed around the world as Christian believers. The international day of prayer for the persecuted church has videos and material in this regard if you would like to learn more.

Meanwhile, we have choices everyday at work, at home, in the community. We can choose to show mercy and care to those who do not receive such.

We do so in part with donations to Bridges to Hope. We can also become more involved in restorative justice issues and problems. We can care about those who have been imprisoned and seek not only their victims' best but their best as well. I know I often watch the daily news and hear some of the crimes and atrocities that people commit, often with what seems to be little consequence. I harden myself. This is not what God wants. I believe God wants each of us to be a part of the solution and not just another part of the problem.

Powerful stories of forgiveness and restitution have come about when victim and offender have been able to risk sitting down together. Both are changed for good. But such acts take courage, and need to be set up wisely.

In many situations, where people have lost the will to work for many reasons, just as in Thessalonians, some of the Christians had lost the will to work because they believed Jesus would return very soon. So Paul addressed the church. Without work, they would not be busy, but become busybodies, in a word play in the Greek text. Paul indicated that it was important to take responsibility for your own life, to work, to provide for yourself, and to serve as God prospered you. He felt so strongly about the value of work, and because there were so many choosing not to work because of the teaching of Jesus' imminent return, he laid down a rule in Thessalonica that if someone refused to work, they should not be allowed to eat at the community gathering.

These are radical words in today's welfare society. Many are unable to work. Many choose to not work. It is not up to me to decide who is who. But the value of work and the desire to not be a burden on the community is a good insight. We need to help each other.

The work of approaching an issue or relationship in the spirit opposite to that which is opposing you is a creative work of the Holy Spirit and our courageous determination to follow God. If there is greed in a workplace or a church or a home, we need to oppose that with generosity. If there is pride and rebellious stubbornness, the way to oppose that is with service and self-abasement. I know many Christian organizations that have sought to simply serve the community by cleaning, as an example. The cleaning of washrooms and toilets in businesses and homes is a kind of way to say we want to help. It is done without the expectation of money but simply as an

act of love. This too can break down barriers which have kept parts of communities apart.

I've mentioned the giving away of food and the opening of community kitchens is another way to help people in dire straits. Of course, there are guidelines and boundaries so this kind of service is not abused. Nevertheless, we can show that our love and care is more than words in this way.

The Lord teaches us to reach out to the needy, the destitute, the widow and orphan, the disabled and the prisoner, those who are sick in body, mind and spirit. There are so many around us in our city, it can be overwhelming to the point of not wanting to do anything.

But the point of exploring this with you is not simply to put guilt on you to do one more thing. It is to ask the Lord what each one of us might do to minister in our hurting world. Like the exercising of our bodies, we need to also exercise our generosity of spirit and love, as we are given such from the Lord. I have much to learn in this area. I wish I could say that I have done much in this area. But I too get discouraged and overwhelmed.

Nevertheless, Jesus speaks to us what Paul said so well: "Brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good." (2 Thessalonians 3:13)

There are moments on this planet where we taste a little bit of heaven. There are moments when we taste a little bit of hell, the selfish, lonely, hateful moments. Those moments of the lion and the lamb lying down together, hundred year old young people, large sweet grapes on the vine even here, walking the trails and streets in safety without fear, those moments happen as we continue to engage our culture and our world in the opposite spirit.

Love casts out fear. Kindness and patience overcomes hatred.

We will not see all that we want to see in this life. But we can choose to be a part of the solution. We can creatively work on ourselves, because we are the only ones we can change, and even then we desperately need God's help.

The coming week is Restorative Justice Week. What can we do to add our acts of kindness, random or otherwise to our hurting world? As we trust

Jesus for being that person he calls us to be. We take a step in the right direction. We sing a new song to the Lord.

Let us pray.