

Playing According to God's Notes
Sermon for the 4th Week after Trinity
Sermon Text: 1 Peter 3:8-17



Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰ For “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; ¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. ¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” ¹³ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

Friedrich von Schiller wrote the following: “This is the curse of evil deeds; they must always give birth to more evil.” What Schiller expressed is something we all can relate to. We are familiar with the experience that evil continuously multiplies. Here is an explanation with the help of an example: A man expressed how deeply hurt and disappointed he is by his family. While he was on vacation, his father died. In his absence, his siblings cleared out the entire house. When he returned, the only task left for him was throwing away the garbage. The man was deeply hurt, disappointed, and angry about the behavior of his siblings. He said: “I was so mad my whole body was shaking. I berated my own family without reason and couldn’t sleep anymore at night. Food even tasted bland to me because my anger wouldn’t let me go.” Although the evil was committed by others, it spreads far and wide and often touches people who had nothing to do with it. Evil is like an undertow that draws everything and everyone under its spell. Being angry or hurt is no fun! The sermon text for today is not only a call against evil but a completely different strategy: “Do not repay evil for evil.” Because evil isn’t destroyed by our repaying it in the same way.

Sin isn’t cancelled by another sin, nor is hostility cancelled with hostility or insult with insult. Things will only get worse and worse. Instead of repaying evil with evil, we should confront evil with good. In other words, we don’t react to what people do to us, but what God does to us. It says in 1 Peter: “on the contrary, bless.” Whoever reacts to evil becomes a servant of evil. Whoever blesses instead of cursing, remains free. This person is a child of God and doesn’t respond with using items from Satan’s toolbox but reacts from the creative power of our God. This releases creative power. This person plays according to God’s melody and doesn’t dance according to the pattern set by the world. Here’s another example: A student is learning to play the piano. The moment she concentrated on her practicing, a fellow student came into the room with his trumpet and drowned out the gentle piano notes with the shrill, off-key tones of the trumpet. The girl’s first impulse was to take the trumpet and throw it out the window. Instead, she did something different. She began to harmonize with the off-key notes of the trumpet and began to create something new. She tried to find a melody that she could combine and harmonize with the sound of the trumpet. Through this, something completely new developed! Our lives as Christians in this world can also be like this. Can we live like this?

Healthy common sense says, “No.” You can’t magically create a melodic sound from all the mismatched tones, and we now live in a fallen world. It can even happen that we bless so much and yet evil remains evil. Yes, it can even get worse. It can even be that Christians are hated precisely because they bless and don’t curse. This is probably exactly what happened to the first Christians to whom this letter was addressed.

A famous Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote at that time the following about Christians: “But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the fire was the result of an order.” (Tacitus Annals Book 15 Chapter 44) And he wrote further that Christians hated mankind. Why in the world did Tacitus think that Christians hated mankind? I can only conclude that he noticed how different Christians were. They were probably different precisely because they played according to God’s music and not to the emperor’s tune. They were different because they didn’t repay hate with hate or violence with violence. They didn’t act according to the motto, “an eye for an eye.” Instead, they did exactly what 1 Peter encourages us to do: “Do no repay evil with evil or reviling with reviling.” Yes, all of this is naturally easier said than done... and I don’t believe that we banish evil from the world by just simply doing something good. Furthermore, it may be that our supposed best good deeds are in truth only pious disguised wickedness... Christians also can’t deny that we too are in the world. We too have feelings of hate, resentment, and hostility. These feelings don’t just exist in the outside world, but also among Christians. What must happen for everything to change? Ultimately, it is that God Himself has taken our place. God Himself became a curse for us. He turned our curse into a blessing by dying on the cross for us. God faced evil people with good and this good, which actually only belongs to Jesus, is given to us. That’s why it says in verse 15 of our text today: “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy...”

With this verse, it becomes clear how we can deal with evil. What must happen is that Christ is placed in the center of our lives. He softens our stony hearts so that we can love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is clear that people can’t deal with evil by themselves. Christ is already holy, righteous, and good, and this Christ gives us His holiness. His holiness should also bring light into the darkest corners of our life. Our lives should be filled with His Spirit so that we also may experience His love and forgiveness. The verse “in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy...” also summarizes why Christians have the power to be different. Those who are serious that Christ is truly God and has truly united with us in Baptism know that there is more to life than what is in this world. The Lord Jesus, who conquered death, is stronger than my feelings of hurt, He is also stronger than anything that scares me. With Jesus Christ, my perspective changes completely! Faith in Jesus Christ opens a perspective on eternity. That means that my life, whether wonderful or sad or both at the same time doesn’t depend upon what happens to me here and now but on my connection to Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ lives in our hearts, it is natural for the world to notice. The world will notice it because the hypnotic power of violence and evil will be broken. In our life, we will encounter many evil people. They are all people that we can forgive just as God forgave us. When God’s love gains space in our lives, the effects are boundless. Evil no longer multiplies, rather good multiplies all the more. Something like this can only happen when God gains a place in our hearts. Amen.