

Column

Preachers are attracted to stories like metal is attracted to a magnet. Most, if they are worth their salt, are keen observers of people, situations and even of their own foibles. Some of these observations find their way into sermons.

Preachers likewise need to be good listeners. Not all the stories they share from the pulpit are their own. Some they pick up through their reading; others they glean from people, including other clergymen.

The story I am going to share with you is of this second variety. It was relayed to me by Fr. Andrew Moore, pastor of the recently formed Orthodox Mission in Blue Ridge. It is one of those stories too good not to pass on. It goes like this:

A little boy of Fr. Andrew's acquaintance was continually being harassed by another boy on the school bus. Pushed, shoved, and taunted, he was not quite sure what he should do about this situation. One option was to get his nerve up and punch the bully in the nose, inflict some bodily pain. There was just one problem: the other boy was bigger, and he was not sure he could bring him down. More than that, he did not want to get in trouble with the school authorities.

Instead, he took his dilemma home to his mother, who was a very wise woman. Together, they came up with an alternate approach, one which comes straight from St. Paul in Romans 12:

“Don't pay back a bad turn by a bad turn . . . As far as your responsibility goes, live at peace with everyone . . . Don't allow yourself to be overpowered with evil. Take the offensive—overpower evil by good!” (J.B. Phillip's translation).

The plan the two contrived was that next time the other little boy began his mischief, he would look him in the eye and say: “God loves you, and I love you. My mother has made some cookies. Why don't you come over this afternoon and play.”

Well, sure enough the very next morning the bully began what had by this time become a daily routine of abuse. Not to be deterred, he looked the mean kid in the eye and said his little script.

The bully was taken by surprise and began to cry. His bluff had been called, and the two boys became friends. Evil had been overcome with good.

Would that all life situations of this sort could be solved with such simplicity and grace. The problem is that we never give Paul's approach a chance. Instead, we follow the all too human approach of flexing our fists, either metaphorically or actually, and getting even. The result is that the cycle of ill-will and destructive behavior is perpetuated. Someone must take the lead in breaking it. Will that someone be you?

Allow me to qualify what I have said thus far. There may well be times when kind words and cookies are not enough, especially in international affairs. For example, it is doubtful such bullies as Hitler, Stalin and Putin would be swayed by such an approach. In our fallen and present world, bullets, tanks and aircraft may be required to restore justice and equilibrium. Nevertheless, alternative approaches should never be ruled out.

Ultimately, in God's economy, grace not guns (as necessary as they may be in the present) will win the day and bring about the peace that was meant to be. In the meantime, be generous with kind words and cookies.

ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, guide, we beseech thee, the Nations of the world into the way of justice and truth, and establish among them that peace which is the fruit of righteousness, that they may become the Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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