In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text is from our Epistle Reading, from Romans Chapter 12, verse 17. St. Paul writes this:

Recompense to no man evil for evil... (Romans 12:17, KJV)

Does it go beyond flesh and blood to refrain from evil when one has suffered it? No, such restraint is not too much for us. Even the one who carries not the name of Christ can withhold himself from evil. He can do as St. Paul urges: he can recompense no one evil for evil. He or she can suffer the blow, without striking in return. After all, there are dangers involved whenever we enter into evil. For one thing, there is the likelihood that we ourselves will become wrongdoers in the eyes of the law, and we will suffer arrest and punishment. And then, even if this were not so, even if we could return evil for evil with the law raising no protest or being unaware of our deed, still the danger remains that if we return evil for evil, the one we retaliate against might raise the bar, and answer us back even worse. He might punch us right in the nose. Or worse! So, no, it does not go beyond ordinary flesh and blood for us to follow the apostolic rule. Each of us is able to hold ourselves back from rendering evil for evil.

But St. Paul is after something more in today’s reading. He seeks to train not only the fist, but also the heart. And so, his rule against returning evil for evil fits under the large and noble caption at the start of our lesson. St. Paul begins his discussion by speaking of love:

Let love be genuine... (Romans 12:9, RSV)

It is possible, of course, for love to be pretense, but the apostle seeks not the appearance of love in us, but the reality of it.

And today’s discussion of genuine love and refraining from evil in turn fit under the still larger caption at the start of Romans 12. I mean the great theme we spoke of last Sunday, when we heard St. Paul’s call that we should offer ourselves, body and soul, to God as our spiritual sacrifice. We noted then that the apostle was asking us to enter into God’s own manner of life, in which he was willing to sacrifice his only begotten Son that we might have everlasting life, and the Son was willing to sacrifice himself and to lay down his life that we might have life and have it more abundantly. St. Paul asks for some worthy similitude between God’s manner of life and our own. Today’s appeal, then, that we let our love be genuine and that we refrain from repaying evil for evil are part of the working out
of our life in Christ. If we would live in him and conform ourselves to him, then we will seek such ideals.

Let me mention two cases of people who have suffered evil, but have returned peace to one who did them harm.

**Terry Anderson**

Do you remember Terry Anderson? He was born in Ohio, but raised in our own state, in Batavia, New York, which is in Genesee County in Western New York. Back in the early 1980s, Terry Anderson was an Associated Press correspondent assigned to work in Lebanon. On March 16, 1985, Anderson was abducted from the street in Beirut, placed in the trunk of a car, and taken to a secret location where he was imprisoned. For the next six years and nine months, he was held captive, being moved periodically to new sites. Other U.S. citizens were kidnapped too, but Terry Anderson was held the longest.

He was released December 4, 1991 and says that he forgives his captors. “I am Christian,” Anderson says, “I must forgive.”

**Pope John Paul II**

Another moving example is Pope John Paul II. You might remember that an attempt was made to assassinate him. The Wikipedia article¹ tells a pretty grim tale:

As he entered St. Peter’s Square to address an audience on 13 May 1981, John Paul II was shot and critically wounded... The assassin used a Browning 9 mm semi-automatic pistol, striking him in the abdomen and perforating his colon and small intestine multiple times. John Paul II was rushed into the Vatican complex and then to the Gemelli Hospital. En route to the hospital, he lost consciousness. Even though the bullets missed his mesenteric artery and abdominal aorta, he lost nearly three-quarters of his blood. He underwent five hours of surgery to treat his massive blood loss and abdominal wounds... When he briefly gained consciousness before being operated on, he instructed the doctors not to remove his Brown Scapular during the operation.

The “Brown Scapular” is a vestment, a kind of apron, which expresses the relationship between Mary, the Mother of Our Lord, and the faithful who entrust themselves to her protection.

Well, the assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca (Turkish pronunciation: [ˈaːdʒa];) was caught:

Ağca was caught and restrained by a nun and other bystanders until police arrived. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Two days after Christmas in 1983, John Paul II visited the prison where his would-be assassin was being held. The two spoke privately for 20 minutes. John Paul II said, “What we talked about will have to remain a secret between him and me. I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned and who has my complete trust.”

For me, this willingness to forgive is a Christlike and extraordinary thing. “...this is the power of God, this the race of Heaven, this the theatre of Angels,” as Chrysostom once phrased things.

**IF WE LOVE ONLY THOSE WHO LOVE US...**

If we love only those who love us, how have we shown any great reflection of Jesus? Even unbelievers do so:

46For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? 47And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? 48Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:46-48, KJV)

Jesus himself is our great example of the one who refuses to recompense evil for evil. When we look upon humanity, we see much that we admire. We seem some beautiful and noble lives. For example, I am particularly moved by poor parents trying with all their hearts to make a good life for their children. Each of us is a mixture of good and bad, of virtue and vice, of laboring and of laziness. Knowing that of ourselves, that we are such mixtures, we are able to look upon many of our neighbors and to admire them, not letting their occasional flaws prevent our overall respect for them.

But when Jesus looks upon humanity, things are different. In him there is no mixture of good and bad, noble and base. Rather, with him, there is continual goodness and relentless pursuit of the good. There is no reason to imagine this is easy for him, just as it would not be easy for you or me to live in a single day with perfection of spirit and heart. Jesus was tempted as we are in every way (Hebrews 4:15), and so I do not imagine it was easy for him to be good. But he was! He continually was! And so, when he looks upon humanity, he sees multitudes of us who have too often declined the path of love and virtue that he chose to walk.

But for all that, Jesus refuses to recompense evil for evil. Indeed, when humanity actively and cruelly chose to kill him, he still spoke words of love toward them:
Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. (Luke 23:34, KJV)

Now, the apostle asks us to enter into this divine manner of life. Those who bear the name of Christ: let us not recompense evil for evil, but overcome evil with good, as did our Lord Jesus before us, to our salvation, and to his glory, who deserves the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.