

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
August 20, 2017

Romans 12: 17-21

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

*This sermon took place in the John Robinson Center, in a coffee house style setting. It ends with a question, so that there is time for the congregation to "write the ending".*

### **Re-visiting Norm**

I have always enjoyed Norman Rockwell, and thought I knew his work fairly well: the playfulness, the humor, the way his work tells a story or captures a moment... So I was excited when I realized that this summer we could work in a visit to the Norman Rockwell Museum on our way to a family wedding in Southern Ontario.

I am sure many of you here today have visited this lovely museum, situated just a few country miles outside of the quintessentially New England town of Stockbridge Massachusetts. If you haven't, I highly recommend it to you.

When we entered the museum, one of the very first pieces we saw was the one you see on the cover of today's bulletin. It's Rockwell, scratching his head, facing a big blank canvas and seeing it once again, it brought up the familiar excitement and terror of beginning any creative endeavor. As a preacher I could relate -- It brought me to many a Saturday night as I sit, staring at that cursor at the top of the page. It's getting to be deadline time and there's a magazine cover to illustrate or a sermon to produce.

Then, everywhere I looked, there were other old favorites. the boy on the high dive board, peering nervously out over the edge. the boy who ran away, sitting at the lunch counter with the burly policeman, the little girl presenting her doll for the kindly doctor to examine, the perplexed young man holding up the Santa suit he's found in his parents bureau drawer. So many moments -- sweet moments -- of childhood, of family life, and some would say "Americana." It may be what I do for a living, but one in particular made me chuckle out loud. The father slumped down in his easy chair, newspaper in hand a full days beard growth and maybe a cigar there too while behind him mother and three children, all dressed for church walk primly towards the door.

In a central room in the museum things suddenly got more serious. The gallery of The Four Freedoms, Rockwell's take on the four freedoms noted by Franklin Delanor Roosevelt in his January 1941 State of the Union Address Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear. Rockwell illustrated these, each of which had a turn appearing on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post with accompanying essays. Here in this room of the museum we'd moved from nostalgia to work that spoke deeply to today. I was held by the power of Freedom of Speech, this handsome man standing with cap in hand, to speak his dissent at a town meeting while those sitting near him listened respectfully giving him their attention. Their faces turned towards him said there was something to learn here, something of worth to hear and consider.

Shortly after this There it was. The well known Ruby Bridges painting, as big and as powerful as I'd always remembered it. Ruby is walking her walk, face forward, determined, while just the legs of the desegregation enforcement agents accompanying her are also in view. It was a brilliant way to tell the story, the spotlight on this one little girl. And yet there were details that I had somehow forgotten, details that said so much. On the wall of the school is a splattered tomato (Rockwell apparently used up many of his wife's homegrown tomatoes to get that splotch just right) and also the N word and also "KKK". Standing before this work just the day before the Charlottesville White Supremacist Rally, I could not help but feel dismayed at how relevant this 1964 work still feels.

And the title: "The Problem We All Live With" He could have entitled it "courage in the line of fire" or "Ruby's walk" But no, it was more prophetic and bold than that: The Problem We All Live With.

Downstairs in the museum, the part we did last, there was a film narrated by one of Rockwell's sons, about Rockwell's personal and professional life. It interested me to know that the young artist had a period where he felt he should be more of a "fine artist". He went to Europe and experimented with modernism... the screen showing a decidedly dour looking predominately brown city scape in the modernist style. Apparently someone contacted Rockwell and rescued him from this, offering him commission for an advertisement line, which he came back home for -- and got back to doing what he really did best. "I'm interested most in capturing a moment, in telling a story" Rockwell said in an interview.

For the rest of that day, Mike and I found ourselves talking about our visit. We talked about how gifted Rockwell was. The faces -- how the man could capture our humanity. We talked about where we found God -- in his gorgeous Do Unto Others showing the great diversity of the human family -- again, so needed today. And the social commentary -- Rockwell using the gift he had, his art, sometimes to make people laugh but also, often, to make people pay attention and *think*.

Which leads me to a question I'd like us to reflect upon.

In the midst of this troubling week, with so much dismaying news, with so many problems we live with, how, like Norman Rockwell, are you called to use your voice, your time and energy in these very days? How might our time, talent, energy help change the story of racism seemingly so alive and well in America today?

Like many of you, I spent some of this week listening to NPR calls where people were reflecting on the best response to Charlottesville, and the Rally taking place yesterday on the Boston Common. There was a lot of anxiety on Friday, the day before. People called in to share why they were going, why that was important to them, or why they weren't going, and what they were planning to do instead. I heard of a walkathon taking place, where pledges go to help organizations that celebrate and protect the diversity of our nation. Some people who weren't going to the rally were walking, or pledging. Already 25,000 dollars had been raised.

We do not all illustrate magazine covers, or write essays, or make public policy. But we all have time, energy, resources we can offer. So again, given the week that has just passed, how are you called to use your voice, your time, your energy, your resources so as – as our morning scripture says “not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good?” (Romans 12:21)

*At this we break for five minutes to converse, and then to hear from each other.*