

Sermon: Burning Coals on Heads?

(Inspired by Liddy Barlow's article, titled: Guilt that burns (22A; Romans 12:9-21, originally published in the Christian Century Magazine, August 28, 2020. Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, August 30, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What does love look like for a nascent Christian congregation in the 1st century Rome? We can do a bit of research, to uncover the socio-economic context of the Empire and its capital city. We can dig a bit further to read what biblical commentators have to say about that emerging church in that great city. We could even project our own idea of love, and brainstorm with others to qualify, and even quantify love. However we might approach such an exercise, we would probably end up writing a very very long list of possible actions before we got to 'heaping burning coals on someone's head'.

So it is ironic that we find Paul advocating precisely such in Romans 12, in our Scripture reading today, a mostly straightforward list of instructions for life in Christian community. Love one another, good; rejoice in hope, good; practice hospitality, better; persevere in prayer, excellent. Burning coal on someone's head? Hm.....That one requires a bit more explaining.

Echoing the teaching of Jesus, of loving one's enemies and turning the other cheek, Paul counsels believers to

*"not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all" (v.17)*

Though such grace-filled and non-violent stance became foundational ideal of Christian ethics, it nevertheless hinges on the understanding that God is just, and the justice of God will no doubt, as in Amos 5:24,

"roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream"

and such justice is undeniable and unstoppable.

God's justice, if one truly believes in what one proclaims, compels us to a radical trust, as Paul quotes directly from Deuteronomy 32:35, "*Vengeance is mine*"—vengeance is in the domain of God.

Instead brandishing our own brand of justice, which is always clouded by our own prejudice, Paul then quotes Proverbs 25:21,

*"If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat,
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink,"*

It is in the following verse, verse 22, that we get

*"for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,
and the Lord will reward you."*

What kind of reward is that—heaping coals of fire on enemies' heads? Scholarly opinions are mixed as to the precise background of this metaphor, if we could even call it that.

Perhaps it does come out of ancient Egyptian ritual of repentance, where a person wishing to demonstrate deep remorse for a wrongdoing would carry a pan of glowing charcoal on their head. Or perhaps it is related to ancient daily life, where neighbours would borrow hot coals in a basket carried on the head, in order to restart a hearth fire that had gone out—although that gesture is more related to hospitality than about guilt.

Whatever the origin, I am of the opinion that the author of Proverbs was an excellent student of the human psychology, for we have all felt that burning sensation right at the back of our head, down to our spine. We've all experienced the hot discomfort of realizing we were wrong. We've felt that fiery squirm when our small-minded pettiness was placed in contrast to another's gracious magnanimity. Whatever we call that intense, painful emotion, be it shame, or guilt, or burning guilt, we have all experienced it, one time or another.

American author and podcaster Brené Brown makes a good point of distinguishing guilt from shame. Shame, according to her, as the painful experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, is destructive and counter-productive. Guilt, on the other hand, is adaptive and helpful. Guilt is holding something we've done or failed to do up against our core values. Guilt can be a positive driver to change for the

better, particularly when it moves us to consider the experience and emotions of others.

Now, we all hope for change from those who have wronged or hurt us. We can try asking them nicely, but that would probably not do much good. We can try to lecture them or berate them—see how far that would get you. Or we could, as suggested in the Proverb, try to repay evil with kindness, with extravagant, grace-filled kindness, trusting it would be like heaping burning coal akin to holy fire, thus allowing the Spirit of God to do the necessary work of divine change. As Paul counsels,

*“if your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink....
do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (v.20-21)

There once was a prophet, named Isaiah, who had a vision of the Lord God sitting on a high and lofty throne. Upon hearing Seraphs, those angelic beings, praising,

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory”* (Isaiah 6:3).

Realizing where was and who he is, filled with an unbearable heaviness of guilt, the prophet confessed, in verse 5, *“Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”*

As the holy fire bore through his heart, one of the Seraphs flies near and reaches out to touch his lips with a burning coal.

*“Now that this has touched your lips,
your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”* (v.7)

What does love look like? Be it in majestic vision or in simple gesture of kindness, whatever it looks like, love creates in us a burning call to change. The burning coals of guilt is a powerful motivator, compelling us, calling us to new life—where our grace-filled action becomes the catalyst for the transformation of others, until that fateful day, the day of the Lord where

*“the wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.”* (Isaiah 11:6)

And the people of God say: Amen, Amen, Amen!

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