

Guilt that burns (22A; Romans 12:9-21)

Love one another: good. But burning coals on heads?

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If we were to brainstorm what love looks like, we would probably write a very, very long list of possible actions before we got to “heaping burning coals on someone’s head.”

And so it’s funny to find Paul making that suggestion here in Romans 12, a mostly straightforward set of instructions for life in Christian community. Love one another, persevere in prayer, practice hospitality: good, good, good. Burning coals on heads? That one requires a little explaining.

Paul echoes Jesus’ teachings about loving enemies and turning the other cheek to those who have done harm. Though these concepts became a foundational ideal of Christian ethics, Jesus did not invent them; they grew from well-loved passages of Hebrew scripture. For instance, Deuteronomy 32 includes the words Paul quotes here insisting that only God can exercise vengeance. And Paul didn’t come up with the burning coals, either; that’s from Proverbs 25, which urges, “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.”

Commentators have struggled to explain this image, reaching for examples of literal burning coals on literal heads. Perhaps the proverb invokes an obscure Egyptian repentance ritual? Or perhaps ancient neighbors might have supplied fire-starters in

convenient head-top carrying cases?

We needn't stretch to identify a historical precedent in order to understand what the author of Proverbs is talking about. We've felt that flaming coal ourselves. We've all experienced the hot discomfort of realizing we were wrong. We've all felt the distinctive fiery squirm when our pettiness contrasts with another's graciousness. We call it "burning guilt" for a reason.

Brené Brown tells us that guilt is a productive emotion. Yes, it is deeply uncomfortable, but it also drives us to change for the better. When we feel guilty, we are more likely to consider the experiences and emotions of others—and more likely to change our own future actions, aligning them more closely with our values.

It's fair to hope for change from those who have hurt us. We could try to create guilt in our enemies by berating or lecturing them, but that would be more likely to generate irritation than eagerness to change. Alternatively, as in the proverb, we could move forward in extravagant kindness, trusting the power of our deeds to generate a holy fire in those around us, trusting in the Spirit to do her work of transformation.

When the prophet Isaiah has his great vision of the Lord's holy throne room, he is filled with regret: "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips." In response, a seraph comes 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," the angel says. Experiencing God's love, whether in a majestic vision or in the simple kindness of others, creates a burning call to change. The fiery coals of guilt call us to new life—and our own actions can encourage that transformation for others.