

Last week, several of y'all asked "what can we do?" Truth is, I don't know precisely, but I am getting some ideas. But first, I want to take a second to address a claim I've seen popping up. There's this idea that says because the left lost and the right won, that means everything the left promoted should be tossed out from trans people serving in the military to flouride in the water. Clearly because they lost, no one buys their so-called propaganda. But it goes further. Have y'all heard of the Paradox of Tolerance? It's not a new idea. One form of it's existed since at least Plato, but the term first appeared in 1945. The Paradox of Tolerance says that if a society values tolerance and extends tolerance to everyone, then it must extend tolerance even to the intolerant. But the intolerant inevitably abuse and take advantage of the system. Then, when the tolerant attempt to curtail the intolerance, the intolerant cry foul and label the tolerant as the truly intolerant ones. In other words, tolerating intolerance leads to trouble. I've seen this referenced a lot. It seems to be seeping out as yet another way to "prove" that the positions of the left are untenable. It's an attempt to make you think your reason isn't all that reasonable, so maybe you should abandon tolerance altogether. But the Paradox of Tolerance is only a paradox if we think of it as morality. If tolerance is a personal value, you can tie yourself up in philosophical knots. So how do we untie that knot?

It's actually pretty simple. Tolerance isn't a moral virtue. It's a social contract. If someone breaks the contract, they're no longer covered by it. So, intolerance by definition cannot be covered by a contract of tolerance. It's the social equivalent of claiming a square is a circle. Our society assumes that contract. For the most part, "live and let live's" pretty solidly American. Even the Gadsden Flag wavers' "Don't Tread On Me" value that contract, at least as it applies to them. But the breach of contract comes when they refuse to apply it to others. I want all of us to commit this to memory. Tolerance is a social contract. But when it comes to what our religion's about, it wouldn't matter whether or not the election was a landslide. The popular thing isn't necessarily the right thing. History's absolutely littered with examples of The Church going astray following the popular will, but it's also overflowing with examples of The Church standing firm in whirlwinds of overwhelming evil. And sometimes, history highlights only a few shining beacons, but sometimes a few is all it takes.

There was a protestant minister in Vichy France that's worth considering. His name was Andre Trocme. Trocme was a pacifist, and he was a pacifist because of his faith in Christ. Trocme actively pursued peace and was so committed to pacifism that the church he represented sent him to a congregation way out in the boonies to keep him from stirring up too much trouble. See, his denomination aligned itself with the Nazi Regime. But Trocme refused to go along with what his denomination did. When Hitler's plan for the Final Solution came into effect, Trocme convinced a handful of villagers to offer their homes to Jews fleeing persecution. Word spread quietly, and soon most households in the village were committed to sheltering these so-called "illegal aliens" from the power of the Reich. The entire village got in on it. The government knew they were up to something, they just couldn't prove it. Even when soldiers came, the people stayed committed. Jewish children attended school under false names. Families hid in barns or basements or sometimes even safely out in the open. Some stayed, some continued on their journey to freedom. When Vichy authorities tried to make Trocme provide a list of Jews he and his people harbored, he said he couldn't because he didn't even know what a Jew was. Just in his village, Trocme was responsible for saving upwards of 2,000 people during World War II, which was more than the entire village's population! He also inspired nearby villages to save who they could, and with the help of other clergy, established a sort of European Underground Railroad. There's really no complete record of how many people this one man saved.

Hearing today's readings, there's all sorts of things we could've talked about from Hannah or Jesus, but we'll do those another time. Because today, Hebrews got me. It's at the tail end of that reading: "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." The idea's solid, but that word, provoke, stuck in my throat. In Greek, it's closer to "an incitement" or "a sharp fit of anger, contention, or a dispute." Maybe it's closer to say "let us consider how to channel sharp fits of anger into love and good deeds." Either way, what does it mean not just to inspire good deeds but to provoke them, to incite them? I don't know about you, but the word "provoke" sounds like something that'd get me punched in the jaw. But love and good deeds? Can you imagine someone getting your goat so badly you just have to go do something good? 'Cause that's what we're talking about here. Getting so riled up that we respond with love. That's what tolerance is about, that's what Trocme did, that's what we have the chance to do. Don't ever let the world convince you that there's nothing you can do or that one person doesn't matter. Trocme didn't stop the Holocaust, but for at least 2,000 people, he changed the world. And the thing is, he wasn't alone. He got the village and other towns involved, sure. But he wasn't the only one. Countless other people--some known to history, some forgotten--were provoked to goodness by the sheer evil they faced. Odds are good he didn't know about most of them, and they didn't know about him. But they did the right thing anyway. They were provoked to love anyway. For them, there was no paradox. There was only provocation. Encouraging his people when the force of the regime loomed, Trocme said, "Look hard for ways to make little moves against destructiveness." In other words, as we look ahead and try to make sense of what's coming, let yourself be provoked. Let yourself be provoked to little moves of goodness and love. Provoke each other to goodness and love.

It occurs to me that, in all that time while the Regime knew what was happening but just couldn't pin Trocme down, never once did they destroy that village. No flames, no bombings, no firing squads lining the village green. They knew he was up to something but they didn't stop him. I'm certain with enough cruelty they could've, but they didn't. And it makes me wonder if something seeped back up the chain of command. Not enough to fix everything but maybe just enough to keep that safe place safe. They could've wiped that little backwoods village off the map, but they didn't. Maybe, just maybe, they were provoked to a tiny sliver of goodness, too. Maybe.

Goodness and love stretch further than any of us know. What a world it would be if red-faced provocations led not to closed fists but to open arms. There need not be any paradox. Just provoke each other. Provoke goodness. Red-faced, steaming ear, top-blown goodness. And provoke love. Angry, frightened, worried love. That's what we can do.