

Revenge – sweet or bitter?



Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Trinity based on
Romans 12:17-21

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written (Deut. 32:35), "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head" (Pr. 25:21-22). Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil

with good.

The smallest children in our society already know that revenge is sweet.... Wait a moment until the adult's attention is elsewhere then the little brother is kicked on the bottom as a just punishment for his annoying nagging. The revenge is sweet. The brother stops nagging and is quiet for a second. But then it starts – the little brother squeals like a stuck pig. The sweet taste of revenge gives way to a lasting, bitter aftertaste. The brother strikes back. The one defends himself and strikes him another blow. A vicious cycle develops. The victim becomes the perpetrator, the perpetrator in turn becomes the victim, the victim becomes perpetrator. The brother yells even louder. The parents come running. The father begins to scold. He intervenes and stops the cycle of violence.

This very human process is not only limited to quarrels between siblings. You can read every day in the newspaper about the escalating wars that are happening everywhere. It begins with a war of words... And if words don't help, then the bombs fall. And all of this becomes worse and worse. There is countless suffering recorded and no end to the dispute in sight. The same goes for politics. Evil has a quality that it multiplies like a virus and gives birth to more and more evil. We can experience something like that in our own lives. Let me give you an example: while you are here in Germany, your father dies. Your brothers at home no longer expect that you come back and distribute the entire inheritance among themselves. There is nothing left for you. They didn't even leave behind a small keepsake...And now this injustice has embedded itself deeply in your thinking. You think about this injustice all day. And at night, you are so angry that you can't sleep. At some point, you are so angry that you can no longer laugh. You are also angry with people that have nothing to do with this business. The evil that happened far away has spread into your life and into your heart that you cannot be free from it. The words Paul says to us today: "Repay no one evil for evil" sounds so good and so right. We should simply break the cycle! The evil that is in the world must never find fertile ground in our hearts and lives. We should do good instead of evil! Is it that easy? Can we simply isolate ourselves from the outside world and pretend that evil things never happen? No, we cannot. We cannot because all of us, like Adam and Eve, have eaten from the tree of knowledge. Whether or not we believe in God or not, we humans know what is just and unjust. And when injustice happens to us, it hits us in the soul. We cannot distance ourselves from it. In this situation, we can say a hundred times: "Do what is good!" And yet we cannot do what is good. We

cannot because God is not in our lives. And that is the key question really: Don't we, like children, need a higher power that intervenes? A higher power that ends the cycle of violence?

Many people and many religions have the idea that God is ultimately the guarantor of justice in this world. Paul also warns us in our sermon text, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God;" and quotes from the Old Testament (Deut. 32:35): "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." The punishment of injustice is an important work of God. But it creates another problem for us. If God consistently avenges all injustice on earth, no one can stand before Him. We too should die under His burning vengeance. With us, the whole world would have to pass under His wrath because we all sin and deserve punishment. We read about such a case of world destruction by God in the book of Genesis (chapters 6-9) in the story about the flood. The people were so evil that God decided to destroy them all. God kept only one man, Noah, his family, and the animals alive by having Noah build an ark. Later, through one man, God would radically change the fate of all mankind and creation.

This man was called Jesus. God made Him suffer the full force of divine punishment. God gave Him the bitter cup of suffering to drink. He led Him even to death on the cross. The story of the earthly life of Jesus is a story of how Jesus took the revenge onto Himself – but Jesus is not only human, but also the Son of God, yes, He is God Himself. In Christ, God takes on the role of man and pays for our guilt Himself in ways that we never could. He creates a new kind of justice that He pays for Himself in which He sacrifices Himself. In doing so, He breaks the vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence. Jesus defeats death, hate, and evil for you. Even when He was on the cross, He prayed that His tormentors be forgiven. This kind of revenge, this kind of self-giving, this kind of justice, is the real work of God. In Him, God's love for you and for all of creation is expressed. Although it sounds paradoxical, God's suffering in Christ is the sweetest form of vengeance we will ever taste. And it remains sweet. It doesn't change into bitterness. The longer we chew on the Gospel, the sweeter it is. Christ Himself endured the bitterness so that we could have joy and freedom.

The goodness, righteousness, love, and freedom that Christ prepared for us on the cross are what Christians and the Church have been given to work with. We all live from this love of God. God confronted the wickedness of mankind with His goodness. He softened our hardened hearts so that we may love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. In our lives, we will be confronted by many evil people. These are all people we can forgive just as God forgave us. When this love of God takes over our lives, the consequences are immeasurable. Evil multiplies. But goodness multiplies exponentially. An example of this can be seen in the life of the Apostle Paul. He, whose heart was filled with hate and revenge, and who executed people all over the world at that time, became a messenger of peace. This is the kind of thing that can happen when God lives in us. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. Amen.