

Romans 12: 9-21: Vengeance Is Mine

How do we know the good guys from the bad? Watching an old movie this week reminded me how much I rely on clear signals: the hero in white, the villain in black, justice served, evil punished. It feels satisfying when wrongdoers get what they deserve.

But then I remembered Paul's words in Romans: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves... Leave room for God's wrath." My satisfaction with the movie's outcome started to make me uncomfortable. Giving up thoughts of vengeance is challenging. When we are hurt, when we are wronged, we want revenge, retribution. We want it even more when someone has hurt people we love. Vengeance feels like fairness. It satisfies our need for justice. But it leaves little room in our hearts for mercy, kindness, or the healing love of God. We replace faith that God is in charge with our need for control, for action.

Paul does not ask us to pretend evil is good. He tells us to be patient. He reminds us to trust God for judgment and to choose a different response: feed the hungry enemy, give drink to the thirsty one who wronged us, offer more kindness than anyone expects. That is not weakness. That is the courageous love of Christ.

This week I read about a church that stood between two deeply divided groups in its community, groups whose ideological distance was such that they were threatening violence against each other. The church could have chosen the safe path of remaining disengaged except for offering prayers for both sides. Nominally a Christian behavior, it protected them from notice, from giving offence, from becoming a target. Instead, they invited both sides to a community dinner. They did not force agreement. They did not solve every problem. They did not expect to. They simply practiced hospitality, poured water, asked about families, and helped people see each other's humanity.

That is what overcoming evil with good can look like. It may begin with a meal, a conversation, a prayer, or one kind act offered to someone we find difficult to like, let alone love. With God's help, we can resist the easy path of vengeance and choose the harder Christ-like path of mercy. We can change the world one conversation, one kind action at a time. Praise be to God, who loved us first, who showed us mercy when we did not deserve it, who offers us salvation instead of judgement. Amen.