

R U Wearing a Mask? Romans 12:9-21

In the late sixteenth century, Thomas Kyd wrote a play entitled "The Spanish Tragedy." It is a play about revenge that includes betrayal, hangings, knife fights, a phantom, and a man on a hangman's platform who thinks he will be granted a pardon up to the instant the trap falls. The theme is revenge, and there is a bunch of it.

In the era of this play, the reign of Queen Elizabeth the first, plays of revenge were like horror movies today. In our culture revenge appears to be a part of being human, but to the Elizabethans revenge was an awful sin, a sin that put them in danger of hell because God has said, "*Vengeance is mine.*"

In verse 19 St. Paul's writing sounds the most like Jesus. In fact, Paul quotes Jesus many times. We could say that St. Paul's words in today's Epistle lesson present his 'sermon on the mount.' Here we discover morality backed by both the words of Jesus and St. Paul. He may be referring to the book of Deuteronomy 32:35 or Proverbs 24:29 where we read "*Vengeance is mine,*" and "*Do not say, 'I will do to others as they have done to me; I will pay them back for what they have done'*" respectively.

In Proverbs 25:21-22 we find support for St. Paul's argument: "*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.*"

This is not only radical but counterintuitive too. The ancient elders who kept the Biblical texts safe and St. Paul, who broadcast the Good News several centuries later, demonstrate this truth. In Paul's culture mistreatment of prisoners was commonplace but wisdom shouts the opposite. The proper way to treat our enemies is to kill them with kindness.

This is a mind-blowing strategy illustrated by what happened following WWII. The Allies joined to rebuild both the buildings and the lives of their enemies. The Heifer International program, where cows from America were given to German families living in bombed-out villages, began here. Peace is not possible where

embittered people are left without hope. Ongoing peace is possible with unexpected kindness.

The Amish people are wonderful examples of treating enemies with kindness. When young girls were murdered at the Nickel Mines school in Pennsylvania, the Amish community responded with forgiveness and kindness. They did so not because it was comfortable or easy (it is not), but because this is what believers do. For these believers the words "*Forgive our transgressions as we forgive those who trespass against us*" are not optional but a command.

On the day the girls were murdered, the murderer killed himself. Later that day members of the Amish community visited the man's family with forgiveness and a financial donation, because they understood that it was going to be difficult for the family to find work in the area.

Jesus and St. Paul taught "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" In the book of Leviticus 19:18 the first part of this verse says, "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*"

Substituting love for revenge, earned or not, St. Paul writes "Let love be genuine." To appreciate the meaning of these words we need to return to the theater. In Paul's lifetime, the influence of the early Greek culture was still active in buildings that could hold thousands of people. The acoustics in these places was almost perfect, even if your seat may make the actors seem like ants in size.

To counter this, the actors wore larger-than-life masks to be sure everyone would understand what emotions the actors were expressing. The name of these masks was 'hupokrites' from which we find our word 'hypocrites.'

Wearing an actor's mask is one thing. In the church of Jesus, however, there is no room for mask-wearing. We expect emotional mask-wearing in dramatic events, even if the actor doesn't feel those emotions. There is no room, however, for it in the church. We could translate Romans 12:9 to read, "*Don't be mask wearers; show genuine love.*"

True love is the basis of all the Apostle Paul writes in the name of Jesus. Doing good, loving one another, celebrating hope, patience in suffering, constant prayer, giving to the needy, and living hospitality, a Greek word that means "love for strangers or outsiders." The sum of all of this is found in St. Paul's final words in this chapter: "*do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*"

There are times when we might feel that it is appropriate to 'put on a good face.' But we must remember encounters with Jesus and St. Paul show us that we are to turn from evil, vengeance, and to cease wearing masks. The counsel of the Holy Scripture is that you and I be honest, vulnerable, generous, and kind when we serve each other in love. Alleluia. Amen.