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Romans 12, 9-21

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Feelings of revenge are strong feelings.

Taking revenge on someone who, in some way or another humiliated me, seems to be part of human nature since the early days.

Kain hates Abel, because he feels treated unfairly.

Then he kills him.

Acts of revenge seem to promise a way out of helplessness and powerlessness.

Not be a victim anymore.

Reestablish balance.

Equal exchange.

Yes, it can be a real temptation to let someone pay for what he did to me. Or what I think he did to me. Call it sweet revenge. It doesn't have to be the big thing, like killing someone. There are many ways to pay back someone who treated you unfairly. Ignore the person, be unfriendly, not help out if he asks for your help.

Even God, says the Tora, wants to take revenge on those of his people who have betrayed him, mocked him, forgotten him.

Revenge out of a disappointed hope.

Revenge out of disappointed love.

The line between striving for something and being obsessed is sometimes very narrow. And revenge is a strong feeling.

Right from the beginning, humans living in communities have tried to find ways to limit the destructive power of revenge.

The Bible is one way to prove that.

God seals Kain with a sign so no one else may kill him. Kain, the murderer is protected by God. He is not supposed to be outlawed.

From the Old Testament we know the rule "Eye for an eye": One counter is allowed, but that

must be enough.

And also the Old Testament already tells us to feed the enemy when he's hungry. We should not withhold the most necessary no any humankind.

And then Jesus comes and tops it all by telling us to love our enemies.

Now let's be honest. Even if we all agree that Jesus' ultimate commandment may help to prevent bad actions, phantasies and longing for revenge most often times still will stay with us for a while. The feelings are there. You will also find them, molded in language, in the psalm prayers against the enemies. And even if we like to hide and ignore such feelings, they still often show themselves in subtle or very obvious ways.

One might react to an insult with impatience, with little provocations or by withholding important information. With little mean acts.

They sometime can be harmless or they can become very destructive in our relationships.

And then we hear Paul's words from today's reading: „Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

Sounds nice and easy at first sight.

Just break the cycle of action and reaction and take a positive stance. Think positive!

Focus on what is good and noble.

In a way Paul asks you not to stay a victim if you became one. He asks you to turn things around. React, but in a good way.

Not suppress the destructive energy, but *use* it and create some *beauty* out of it.

The longer I kept thinking about it, the question arose: How is that possible? Paul will look at us, with a witty and gentle smile, saying: If it was that easy, our congregations and communities would be a Garden Eden!

And then, Paul thankfully has a very sober way to continue by saying:

„If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

It's not always possible. It doesn't only depend on us. Some things can't be solved.

Some relationships end. Sometimes what it needs is distance.

I am only responsible for my actions.

This seems to be our task: stop focusing too much on the others.

Instead of an „Eye for an eye”:

Do what is right. And beautiful. And then let go.

To keep distance, this seems to be addressed in yet another way:

„Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God!”

Make room!

If we keep focusing on our enemy and his wrongdoings: Could it be that by doing that we stand in the way of change? If we urge someone to change: Could it be that by doing that we block the room where he could get in contact with himself?

Or is it about making room in ourselves?

Feeling what we are drawn to? Where do we want to go?

Paul motivates us to act self-determined. Follow the Tora, the Bible or your own values and then take a stance, regardless of what everyone else is doing. Act even without knowing if God will intervene.

It requires strength and inner maturity to stop being a victim. But at the same time not being the one who simply endures any kind of insult and humiliation – which in the end would make us accomplices of evil. And of course, look for others who have been harmed and fight for their rights, especially when they can't help themselves.

We can and should stand up for ourselves. But not by repeating the wrongs of our enemies. Not by strengthening the cycle of violence and counterviolence. But by breaking it and finding a new way, a fruitful perspective.

It could be, says Paul, that our enemy gets startled and leaves in shame. That is what Paul refers to when he says: When you care for your enemies “you will heap burning coals on their heads.” (Rm 12,20) Enemies with a red face like in old Egypt. Where people who knew about their guilt would walk the streets with a bowl of burning coals on their head.

„Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Rm 12,21) What could this mean for us, for you in the coming week?

God help us and the spirit of God be with us all.

Amen.