



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The 21st Sunday after Trinity, October 16th 2016

✠ **In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost** ✠

According to the late Ed Koch, former Mayor of New York and one of the great political luminaries of our age, the first rule of politics is never to let a bad turn go unpunished. And this shouldn't come as too much of a surprise. If love is the most powerful of all the human emotions, the next most powerful is the yearning for vengeance.

Getting even is a fundamental principle of childhood that remains with us throughout our adult lives. As one gets older, one becomes more sophisticated, of course. But the drive to get even in no way lessens.

When I was in my twenties, when folks got on our nerves, we would apply for all sorts of jobs in their name. They would discover they had volunteered for the army, applied for jobs working in the sewers or prison guards or lighthouse keepers.

One of the most creative acts of vengeance I have ever encountered was perpetrated by a fellow called Patrick Fermoy. Patrick had an extraordinarily difficult and unpleasant boss who delighted in demeaning him. And his instrument of vengeance was the derby – the bowler hat, we call it in England – his boss habitually wore.

Patrick hit on the idea – from a novel, he claimed – of buying two other derbies exactly like the original. One was a size larger than his boss's hat and the other a size smaller. And he had the hatbands stamped in gold with his boss' name in precisely the same place and in

precisely the same typeface as in the original.

Patrick exacted his revenge by substituting one his specially made hats for his boss' hat when his boss wasn't looking. One day the poor man would discover his hat was too tight, the next day it would be down over his ears. And the day after that it would be back to normal again. Apparently, it didn't occur to the poor man that Patrick was playing around with his hat.

Instead, because each hat looked exactly the same, he came to the conclusion that his head was constantly swelling and shrinking. It caused him incalculable anguish and endless trips to the doctor. I don't know whether he ever discovered the truth.

It's amazing how many quotations about vengeance one can find in the reference books. "Revenge is sweet," is the shortest. "Revenge is a dish best eaten cold," is one of the more chilling. And then, of course, there is that bothersome quotation St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

That's the pity of it. Exacting vengeance might be fun to contemplate, but God doesn't approve of it – or at least he doesn't approve of the way we tend to indulge in it. The reason for this is that a desire for vengeance (or our human concept of it, at least) actually serves to separate us from God.

It runs utterly counter to everything God is – and

everything he stands for: God tells us that he is love. A desire for vengeance, however, is inspired by hatred – the emotion that is the absolute antithesis of love. Human beings cannot afford to indulge even in fantasies about revenge, getting even, or vengeance – call it what you will – because just thinking about it points us in precisely the opposite direction from God.

This leaves us with a very serious problem: How do we fight back against people who do awful things to us? Not to react at all would be to leave evil triumphant. But how is it possible for us to win out in the end if we cannot attack those who have declared war on us? Attack, after all, is the most effective form of defense.

This is one of the subjects addressed in today's Bible readings – most notably in chapter six of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, the reading appointed for the Eucharist. It is also covered in a passage from Second Corinthians which is one of the readings appointed to be read at Morning Prayer.

The Epistle to the Ephesians might best be described as the Church's Constitution. But it is also very much more than that: it is a battle plan that constitutes the blue print for the Church's survival.

Ephesians is pure fighting talk: "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

For Christians, Paul says, the key to survival – the key to winning the battles forced upon us – is unity. He opens Ephesians by outlining God's original plan for the unity of creation, pointing out that, in Christ, this has become a reality.

The two divisions of the human race, Jews and Gentiles, are henceforth united into one body, with one head, Jesus Christ, and one God and Father of us all. Christians must reflect this

magnificent unity – in stark contrast to the violence and discord that are found in the heathen communities which surround us.

This means we need to remember that the Church is a family, and not a collection of individuals pulling in different directions. He spells out the sort of virtues that create harmony: truthfulness, temperance, generosity, honest application, loving kindness and a horror of impurity.

Harmony between Christians isn't simply a nice ideal. It is absolutely vital for the Church's survival, he says. Christians are constantly locked in spiritual warfare with the hosts of wickedness. Therefore they cannot afford to be divided, off-guard or unarmed.

This sounds decidedly defensive. So how do we go on the attack? Paul's answer is a bit surprising to modern ears. It isn't writing to members of Congress or filing lawsuits and counter suits in the courts. It most certainly isn't rude letters or petty acts of vengeance. The best form of attack is also our best defense, says Paul. And his plan is basically a very simple one: prayer and preaching the Gospel.

Paul puts it this way: "Take the helmet of Salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit . . . that utterance may be given unto us, that we may open our mouths boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel . . ."

The best revenge of all – and the thing most pleasing to God – is to make friends out of the folks who hate us. If we can convert our enemies to become our brothers and sisters in Christ – if we can enfold them in Christ's Church – everyone is a winner.

Instead of enemies we have friends with whom to share God's peace that passes understanding. It is not our idea of revenge, of course, but, then, "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord, "I will repay." And when it comes down to it, it's God's job to make the rules. And it's our duty to follow them. *AMEN.*