

Have you ever heard the term “White Elephant?” Have you ever received a present which turned out to be a White Elephant gift? Every person or family has their stories about White Elephants – those usually hilarious, always useless objects that sit in our closets, our basements, or our attics for year after year, because we just do not know what to do with them. White Elephants have even been turned into a Christmas game – have any of you ever played it?

In the game, families or friends gather to exchange gifts, with each person bringing one wrapped contribution. The gifts are placed in a central location, and participants determine in which order they will take turns selecting them. The first person opens a wrapped gift, and the turn ends. On subsequent turns, each person has the choice to either unwrap a new present or to "steal" another's. When a person's gift is stolen, that person can either choose another wrapped gift to open or can steal from another player.

The game is over when everyone has a present. Sometimes the gifts can be very nice, but most of the time they are those ridiculous things that we just can't get rid of. In fact, we still can't get rid of them, because if you play the game with the same group year after year, as many do, eventually the White Elephant you gave away comes back to you.

Ironically, the White Elephant originated in Siam (modern-day Thailand) as an act of subtle revenge. In the ancient history of Siam, the King would give a rare albino Elephant to those in his court who had fallen out of favor. Since any albino animal was sacred, it had to be cared for throughout its lifetime, and since the white elephant was a gift from the regent, it could not be refused. Eventually the unfortunate recipient would go bankrupt trying to feed and maintain the elephant, and after all of his or her resources were gone, the king would take it back, so he could gift it again for the next act of royal vengeance.

The act of revenge, whether subtle or conspicuous, passive or violent, has always been an instinctive part of being human. Sir Walter Scott in his novel “The Heart of Mid-Lothian” perfectly describes the essential definition of the word when he writes, “Revenge, the sweetest morsel to the mouth that ever was cooked in hell.” How could we argue with Scott when we see acts of revenge played out in the story of Jesus of Nazareth?

We see Peter and the apostles take out their swords in Gethsemane to strike against those who have come to arrest their Lord. We see the Passover plot, an elaborate scheme of revenge, cooked up by the High Priests of the Temple in response to Jesus’ popularity and the growing belief in Israel that he might be the true Messiah. When Jesus stands in judgment, we see Pilate reluctantly respond to the threats of vengeance by those in the crowd, who promise to report the governor to Rome if he allows the “dangerous rebel” to go free. Even as Christ hangs on the cross, one of those executed with him mockingly calls upon Jesus to take revenge: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself, and us.”

In response to this ancient cycle of threat and revenge, we see Jesus, the Son of God, tell his followers to put away their swords, even as he heals the results of their violent response; we see him surrender himself silently to both the High Priests, the religious leaders, and the Roman governor; even on the cross, his response to those who call for vengeance is one of forgiveness, mercy, and unconditional love: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, humanity learned a way to respond to our will to vengeance, a new way expounded to us by Paul in his letter to the Romans. “Beloved, never avenge yourselves...no...if your enemies are thirsty, give them something to drink;

for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

That one word, “No,” is a hard one, isn’t it? It is a word we hate to hear; and yet, it is one of the first words that any responsible parent or caregiver teaches a child. To say “no” to our deeply imbedded instinct for revenge is the very essence of both Christ’s teaching and his life, but Paul also knows that our ability to respond to that inner “no” cannot be isolated from our desire for justice. That is why the Apostle writes, “...leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord.” Revenge is an act of sinful humanity – justice is an act of a good and loving God.

Reading Paul’s words, we might think that he is just transferring violent vengeance from the human to the divine, especially when he uses an odd and seemingly ugly image: “...by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads,” but Paul’s image of burning coals is not to be associated with hell or eternal punishment. In the time of Paul, slaves would carry hot coals in thick wooden containers balanced on their heads in order to heat the homes of their owners or provide fuel for cooking. Paul’s image in Romans is not one of revenge, but of burden. The ability for followers of Christ to forsake great or petty vengeance takes that burden out of our hearts and leaves it with God, who will do true justice apart from our feelings, because God always knows the truth.

One of my favorite songs is “The Heart of the Matter” by Don Henly, and as he sings about forgiving his lost love, he explains why: “There are people in your life / Who've come and gone/ They let you down / You know they hurt your pride / You better put it all behind you baby / 'Cause life goes on / You keep carryin' that anger / It'll eat you up inside...”

Paul's words and Henley's modern interpretation is why we come to this table this morning.

Recall once again the words of Sir Walter Scott: "Revenge, the sweetest morsel to the mouth that ever was cooked in hell." The morsel we share this morning at the table of the Lord was cooked in heaven, and the spiritual sweetness of the bread and the cup quench our bitter thirst for revenge. The White Elephants that keep coming back to us, whatever they may be, are permanently taken up by the love of Christ and the justice of God, freeing us from the hurt and anger that retribution demands.

In the movie Ben Hur, there is a crucial scene that summarizes the effect of Christ's death on those who encountered him. Ben Hur speaks to Esther after he has witnessed the crucifixion. In marveling at Christ's response to his crucifiers, Ben Hur explains the transformation that changed, not only him, but potentially all humanity for all time: "Almost at the moment He died, I heard Him say, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' Esther replies, 'Even then.' Ben Hur says, 'Even then. And I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand.'"

This morning there are swords that need to be removed from our hands and from our hearts, and that is why we have the gift of this table. It is Christ's "no," not only to our desire for vengeance, but to every unworthy instinct that plagues our sinful condition. This sacrament is God's "no" to our sin, and Christ's "yes" to his grace for all of us. What burdens do we bear this day? Let us bring them to this feast, and leave them where they belong.