

# Vengeance is Mine Says Brian

Romans 12

When I was young everyone was obsessed with Nebraska Football. I don't want to indicate that I was not with them in this obsession. It was only that most of the football games were not accessible to me. Tickets were sold out and the only way to hear the game was to listen to it on the AM radio station KLIN.

Occasionally we would get cheap tickets to see the Nebraska Cornhuskers play basketball (they were horrible), but the only live sports that I really attended were amateur boxing matches on Friday nights with my father. These matches were called "Smokers" and my father had done some amateur boxing (aside from the one's with his brothers) while he was in the Navy. The matches were called smokers because the ring was placed in the basement of Pershing Memorial auditorium and so many people were smoking that it lingered in the air. These are not to be confused with the illegal Smoker fights that have cropped up in urban centers.

Other kids my age huddled by the walls playing pennies, but I was mesmerized by what was going on in the ring. Although I am no longer as into this sport today, I was so interested in how much skill went into being a good boxer.

My father and I enjoyed boxing immensely. It was called the sweet science for a reason. At its best boxing is a very skilled athlete who uses specific strategy to defeat the other opponent in the ring. In Golden Gloves boxing there is the occasional knock down, but with heavier gloves and head gear it forces boxers to think more about scoring points than knock downs. Two good boxers in a fair fight would make the crowd go crazy.

We also would watch something else that seemed similar. It was done in a ring, it had an official, there were generally two opponents, but it was qualitatively different than boxing. This was The World Federation of Wrestling. This was pre-Vince McMahon and his slick television wrestling. There was Junkyard Dog, Dusty Rhodes, Ric Flair, the Iron Sheik, and Hulk Hogan. But for me there was only one wrestler of any worth. The one who was a legend beyond legend. That was the herculean Andre the Giant.

The difference between Wrestling and Boxing would be obvious to anyone who has watched them. One is the sweet science the other is a drama of unreal competition. Wrestling had a set storyline, a script, fights that have acrobatics and plot twists. Each wrestler has a back story and each competition has a well-choreographed build up. There is always another chapter to the story. The one thing we know for certain is that they are fake.

I have been a pastor for many years. I have obviously never shied away from a good fight. What I like about good conflict is there is the possibility of resolution. I do not mind people being mad at me if they are being honest with themselves and me. I am sorry for those who are conflict adverse, but every church has fights. It is the sign that we are passionate, finite, and human.

The joke goes that where there are three or four Presbyterians, there are two or three opinions. I love the resolution that can bring compromise. No one has exclusive property of the truth. Yet, over time I do not run to every fight. I let others fight and be the moderator toward movement. Yet, there are things worth fighting for.

I can honestly say that most of the conflicts I have encountered in the church are not at all like a good boxing match but are more like

wrestling matches. Most of our church conflicts are fake. They are filled with old drama and back stories, old resentments, jealousy, and back-stabbing. They are the projections of mommy or daddy issues, power plays, personality conflicts, manners and ideological coercion. Most of them rarely are purely about the issue at hand, they are vengeance for old scores. More about the pain inside the perpetrators than about movement, action, or community.

If we were truly honest, many of us who court vengeance are merely addicted to the drama of unresolved anger. This runs counter to the solution of grace served by the church of Jesus Christ.

We are asked so many positive things to do as the church by Paul in Romans. It is a compendium of how a church can thrive in being disciples of Jesus Christ:

- Show genuine love
- Hate evil
- Cling to what is good
- Hold what is good
- Outdo each other's honor
- Show mutual affection
- Associate with the lowly
- Don't lack zeal
- Serve the Lord
- Bless those who persecute you
- Rejoice with those who rejoice
- Weep with those who weep
- Live in harmony with each other
- Contribute to the needs of the Saints
- Think about what is noble in everyone's sight.
- Feed your enemy.
- If possible, live in peace with each other.

-Overcome evil with good.

Sounds like that would be a perfect mission statement for any Church. Yet, did you notice one thing in this passage that we are not supposed to practice. Not one of those includes seeking retribution for wrongs. According to Paul, vengeance is not your spiritual possession. Paul is correct.

As I read this list and I feel convicted of spending my time on the negative aspects of vengeance. I told someone once a line I stole from Phil Collins. If you did me serious wrong and were drowning, I would not lend a hand. It may have caused a shocked laugh, but it was wrong. Vengeance is not Brian's. It is not my spiritual legacy as part of my calling to hold to my chest every wrong done to me. If there is any retribution to be meted out, it will be done by God. Yet, I know a secret about God. God is gracious and will most likely not met out any retribution but will patiently hope for the change of anyone who does evil. How do I know that? Because God has been incredibly patient with me.

I don't know about you, but I am weary of conflict in our world. It is discouraging, but understandable when we encounter conflict in the church. Yet, we are human and will always have conflict within any human activity we endeavor. The church will not be any different in the fact that conflict will occur. Still, we don't have to perpetuate the sinful resolution or lack of resolution that conflicts have in the world. We need to fight fair, come to resolution, and then let it go.

I am recommitting myself to that list given to the Romans by Paul this morning. I hope that all of us in the church commit ourselves to that type of Christlike list this morning. If we do we will leave very little time for wrestling matches.