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The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
23 February 2014
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Lev 19.1-2, 9-18; Mt 5.38-48

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

There was a story in the New York Times a while back about two chaplains:
a Lutheran and a Roman Catholic.¹
They were baseball fans and had a \$10 bet on game 7 of the world series—
it was the Cardinals and the Red Sox.

It seems petty, but 10 bucks went a bit further back in 1946.
Anyhow, these two chaplains had more than baseball uniting them.
They were both charged with the pastoral care of those Nazis awaiting trial in Nuremberg.
It's an amazing story, really.
Hard to imagine consoling the conscience of those orchestrating one of the greatest atrocities
against human nature.
There's hardly a better known enemy than a Nazi—
and the men on trial weren't just any run-of-the-mill Nazis; they were Hitler's top men.
This Lutheran and this Roman Catholic were given orders
to hear their confessions (if they so desired),
to preach the Word of God,
and to feed them with the life-giving Body and Blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin.

Years later, when the son of the Lutheran Chaplain was rummaging through his dad's old stuff—
getting the house ready for sale, after his dad had been called into glory—
he found stacks and stacks of hate mail that his dad never shared with him.

Some called the chaplain a Nazi-lover
(and there are few harsher things to say than that!).
But then again—judging from today's Gospel reading—
there are few more *blessed* things to be called than that!
"You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." (Mt 5:43-45)

Those two chaplains, whatever their faults, did what most clergy would never do.
They did what most Christians thought appalling.
They did what goes against every fiber of our being—
they loved their enemy.

Who is your enemy?
Muslims, for the terrorist activity of 9/11?
Gays, for seeking to redefine marriage?
Catholics, for their love of Mary and good works?

¹ Dan Barry, "A World Away, the Seventh Game; Close at Hand, Condemned Nazis." *New York Times*.
October 26, 2013.

We've all got our enemies.
 We're not typically as out in the open about it
 as say, the Pharisee who thanks God he's not like those tax collectors over there.
 But our enemies rest deep within our hearts.
 It's those people that we really hope we don't run into,
 those who, when we're around 'em, make us sick to our stomach,
 who cause us to sweat and fume and blow up.

And sometimes—often, in fact—our enemies aren't mutual.
 I'd say it's probably rare that our enemies don't know we detest them—
 but that doesn't mean they detest us back.
 They know we hate them because of our coldness.
 They can sense the way we won't look them in the eye.
 They see how quickly we try to avoid or leave the situation.
 They pick up on the false persona, they see through the fake smile all the way to the gritted teeth.

I've got enemies too.
 And while I know I should love them, I don't.
 And if that sounds unchristian to you, it should!
 But at the same time, it's true.
 I don't like it; I hate it, in fact.
 And so I pray for them by name every week.
 But even when I pray, the prayer always tends to begin for a prayer that God would change them.

Now, I don't think it's wrong to pray that God would change someone—
 we see that all through the Scriptures.
 But what's wrong is that I believe that if God would just change them, *then* I could love them.

It's here that we see the fundamental difference between our love and God's.
 Our love seeks what is pleasing to it:
 those who speak well of us,
 who agree with us,
 who look and sound and act like us,
 who hate what we hate and love what we love.
 Simply put, we love ourselves.
 Our love is curved in on itself.
 And so whatever pleases and delights us, is what we love.

But not so with God.
 God's love creates, it makes from nothing something and someone to be loved.
 His love seeks what is most unlovable, and makes it his own.
 He doesn't first wait for us to become more like Him—
 if that were the case, none would be loved and the world would go to hell.

“But instead,” as St. Paul says, *“God shows His love for us in this:
 that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Rom 5:8)

He loves the unlovable and forgives the unforgivable.

To the evil ones that slap Him on the cheek, He turns to them the other also.
 To those who strip Him of His tunic, He gives also the cloak of His righteousness.
 To those forcing Him one mile, He carries them not just for a time, but into death and back.
 He gives to those who beg for mercy and He will not refuse any who would borrow from Him.

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’
 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 5:43-45)*

That’s too much for us.
 Our love can’t do it.
 But God in Christ has done it for you.

His sun shines on the evil and the good.
 His rain waters the crop of the just and the unjust.
 His love doesn’t wait for us to get in line, but it lines us up into His righteousness.
 And this is seen all on the cross.

There we see His love most clearly.
 There His forgiveness is won for us.
 There, this sermon on the mount demanding perfection and holiness and pure love is fulfilled.

But here, in this Church, that love and perfection and holiness is delivered to you.
 Here the forgiveness of your sins is preached and is the bread that feeds you.
 Here Christ is for you and you are brought into Christ.

And so it’s here that the demand—
“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”—
 turns into a promise.

That’s what Leviticus was on about anyhow.
“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” (Lev 19:2)

It’s not a demand to first be holy so you can line up with Him;
 it’s a promise that whatever goes for Him now also goes for you!

His holiness is yours.
 His perfection, yours.
 His love, yours.

Therefore, love your enemies—
 not with your feeble, self-serving love, but with His love, the love of Christ!
 For it is the love of Christ that dwells in you and grows and spreads to all.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit