

Loving Enemies

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the first reading from Acts. **Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.** Here ends our text.

Who is your enemy? Is it one of the girls at school who makes fun of your outfit? Is it the bully who knocks the books out of your hand? Perhaps it's your neighbor who continues to dump his lawn clippings on your property despite your complaints. Maybe it's someone from another political party who argues against you. If you served in the armed forces, it was very clear who your enemy was. It was the Nazis or the soldiers of the emperor of Japan. It was the Communist backed North Koreans or the Vietcong. It was the Imperial Guard or Insurgents. And the world has taught us some very common-sense rules about enemies. When choosing up sides, never pick your enemy to be on your team. And you certainly don't go over to the other side and join your enemy. Never turn your back on your enemy. Never concede the boundary. And never lay down your weapon in his presence. Instead, keep your guard up. When he's down, keep your foot on his throat. Show no mercy for none will be shown to you. The world says, “Hate your enemy, and when you get the chance, hurt him.” It's kill or be killed.

Now the Bible has many ways of describing man in his sinful, unconverted state. It describes him as being blind. He's in darkness. He needs his mind and heart to be opened so he can see. Or the Bible describes man as spiritually dead. His sinful spirit can do nothing to raise itself to life or even believe. But these descriptions paint man as only being needy or at worst neutral. Dead men don't fight back. But the Bible also describes man in his sinful nature as being an enemy of God. The apostle Paul writes, “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.” Man in his unconverted state actually fights against God. He's an enemy of God. And of all people, the apostle Paul ought to know.

You see in our text today, Paul is fighting against God. Before he adopted his Greek name of Paul, he went by his Jewish name of Saul. And as an unbelieving Pharisee, he's an enemy of God. Saul was the official coat checker for those who stoned Stephen. Stephen was martyred for his witness of Jesus Christ, and Saul stood by giving approval to his death. Saul persecuted the church in Jerusalem and breathed out murderous threats against Christians there. But that wasn't enough. When Christians fled to other cities because of persecution, Saul pursued them. He went to the high priest in Jerusalem and asked for letters to the synagogue in Damascus so that if he found any Christians worshipping there, he'd have authority to bind them and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. Saul set out on his 150-mile journey, but along the way he was met by his enemy.

A light from heaven flashed around him, and Saul fell to the ground. Jesus said to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Now Saul hadn't been one of the soldiers who whipped Jesus and pounded the nails through his hands and feet. But he was still persecuting the body of Jesus. Every time Saul arrested, bound, flogged, or killed a Christian, he was bruising, cutting, and mutilating the body of Christ. For Christians are members of Christ's body. He is our head, and we are his body. And when we bleed, Jesus feels it. When his body is poked and jabbed, Jesus has compassion on his Church, enough to put a stop to it.

But Jesus didn't kill his enemy. He had his phaser set for stun. He struck Saul with blindness and told him to go into the city and wait for his instructions. Saul rose from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he saw nothing. He could walk, but he had to be led into the city. This also describes Saul's spiritual state. Though his eyes were open, he was spiritually blind. This describes the unbeliever. Though his eyes are open and he's walking around, spiritually he's a dead zombie.

But what does one do with a captured enemy? Jesus had more in mind than just immobilizing Saul. He was going to convert Saul so he would no longer fight against God but fight for him. There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord told him to go to Saul and lay his hands on him and restore his sight. He was to show mercy to his enemy. But this breaks all common sense rules about enemies. Ananias complained, “Lord I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” “Lord, do you know what you're doing? Never choose your enemy to be on your side. You've got your foot on his throat. Don't let up! If you do, he'll just kill more Christians. And you want me to go to this man and show mercy to him in your name? The moment I do, he'll just arrest me. Why should I let my guard down?” But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Third Sunday of Easter - May 1, 2022

The Lord didn't kill his enemy. He loved him and chose him to be on his side. His plan was to convert his enemy and change him to fight for him.

Now you might be like Ananias. You know someone who's an outright enemy of God. "Lord, this person will never change. He's too set in his ways. He'll never listen. If I show him mercy or speak to him about you, he'll only spit in my eye." But *we* don't choose people for salvation. *God* does. He simply says, "Go. Let your guard down. Show mercy. Be my witness." You are Christ's instrument to carry his name to others.

So Ananias goes to Saul. He says to his enemy, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. Saul was healed in body but not in soul. He was still blind spiritually. So Saul arose and was baptized. His old sinful nature, which was blind and an enemy of God, was drowned. It was killed. But his new man arose. At his baptism all his sins of hatred of Christ and persecution of his body were forgiven. At his baptism the Holy Spirit made Saul a new man. Now notice that Saul wasn't converted by his experience of meeting Jesus Christ on the road who only rebuked him of his sin. He wasn't converted by being stricken with blindness. He was only stunned by the Law. But it was the simple words of the Gospel spoken by Ananias and the simple water of baptism that changed a hardened enemy into God's instrument. Water and the Word are God's means of grace which the Holy Spirit uses to change enemies into friends.

Our reading says that Saul spent some days with the disciples of Damascus. He learned from them the full Gospel of who Christ is and what he did for our salvation. Then Saul immediately proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue there, saying, "Jesus is the Son of God." He confounded the Jews in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. All the people who heard Saul, unbelievers and believers alike, were amazed. They were amazed that this man, who had once wreaked havoc in Jerusalem among Christians, who had come to Damascus to arrest believers and bring them bound for trial, who had been an enemy of Jesus, had now switched sides. He was an advocate of the Christian faith. Indeed, the conversion of Saul from a hardened enemy of Christ to an instrument for his use is one of the greatest testimonies to the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And yet the miracle of Saul's conversion was really no different from your own. For you, too, were once an enemy of God. Oh, you may not have gnashed your teeth and breathed out murderous threats against Christians, but you were still God's enemy. You rebelled against God's Commandments and followed the god's of this world, mammon, lust, and self. Or you lowered the bar of God's Law to your own standards and sought to be self-righteous. You were unrepentant and rejected God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. In spiritual matters, there is no neutrality. Jesus said, "Whoever is not with me is against me." And you weren't with Jesus. So you were an enemy of God. And by the worldly rules for enemies, God shouldn't choose you to be on his side. He shouldn't concede the boundary of the Law and allow you to step into his territory with all your sin. He should show you no mercy.

But Jesus Christ broke all the rules for enemies. He crossed the boundary of the heavens and entered the territory of his enemies. He came into our world. In his humility, Jesus laid aside his divine powers. He unwisely put down his weapons and let his guard down in the presence of his enemies. He turned his back on his enemies and allowed himself to be beaten and flogged by them. And when the soldiers mocked him and pounded the nails into his hands, Jesus had mercy on his enemies. He said, "Father, forgive them." Jesus didn't kill his enemies. Instead, he allowed himself to be killed by his enemies. By his death, Jesus showed that he didn't hate his enemies, but loved his enemies. Jesus broke all the rules for dealing with one's enemies.

But by his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus converted his enemies. The centurion at the cross confessed, "Surely this man was the Son of God." By baptism and the Word of the God, the Holy Spirit converted Saul. And by water and the Word he converted you. God chose you in Christ from the beginning of time to be on his side even when you were his enemy. Jesus pursued you and caught you and led you to baptism. Though you arched your back and cried in defiance, he washed your sins away. Though you were blind, he opened your ears to hear the Word of the Gospel. God killed your old sinful spirit with all its hostility against him, but he raised to life a new spirit within you. He changed you from a vessel of wrath to an instrument for his use. He converted you from his enemy to his friend.

Jesus loved his enemies. He loved you. And by his love, Christ enables you to love your enemies, even that bully, your inconsiderate neighbor, or those who mock you. We can't save our enemies or convert them. Only God does that. But we love our enemies. We love because God first loved us. We follow our Lord's command to go and carry his name before others. We lower our defenses and say to our enemy, "Brother, the Lord has sent me to tell you about his love for you in Jesus Christ, that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Arise and be baptized. Come, let us be friends." Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.