

Lenten Midweek 2 – 2023
The Prayer and the Blood
Hebrews 5:1-10
Matthew 26:36-46

How many enemies do you have? It's a strong word, isn't it – enemy? My classic *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines enemy as “a person who feels hatred for or fosters harmful designs against another; an adversary or opponent.” As children, having an enemy was routine. Oh, our blood didn't run too hot but there were bullies or social groups that aligned themselves against us and us against them. Sometimes childhood patterns continue into our adult lives, but enemies? That's kind of strong, right? I am quite convinced that in the 1940's Americans saw very clearly that both the nations of Germany and Japan were their enemies. Death on the battlefield, an unambiguous threat to our sovereignty as a nation, and the fact that for some time the outcome of this World War was in doubt – Germany and Japan and Italy were our enemies; the very definition of enemy. Each of you is supremely familiar with the concept of an enemy.

How many do you have? As a servant of the Truth (John 14:6), are lies your enemy or do you think that that's going too far? As one who knows that God loves justice (Isaiah 61:8), is injustice your enemy or is that too bellicose? Hearing God articulate what He requires of us, that we do justice, and love kindness and that we walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8), does that mean that pride is your enemy? One of the definitions for treason is to give aid and comfort to the enemy. I wonder what that would mean if we put it in theological terms. Is sin your enemy? What about Satan, does he qualify as your enemy? The Bible makes it clear that Satan hates you, that he harbors harmful designs against you. Is your guard up against your enemy? In war, the enemy is known by his uniform. Satan, and those in league with him, do they wear a readily identifiable uniform? Is a Christian supposed to be able to discern friend from foe?

Is your sinful flesh your enemy? Ah, now we're hitting close to home, aren't we? We renounce Satan and all his works and all his ways. Do we renounce our sinful flesh? The book of Romans says that we are to mark and avoid those who cause division in Christ's church. “For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve” (Romans 16:17). How does one “mark and avoid” one's sinful flesh? Jesus had enemies. But didn't He say that we are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27)? Did Jesus love the devil? Did Jesus do good to death? Did Jesus love sin? So there's a difference here, yes? Jesus deals with His human enemies by removing their sin and pardoning them rather than by condemning and punishing them. How about sin, death, and Satan? Those are ferocious enemies, right? Does Jesus redeem them or confront and vanquish them?

That prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane – it's not serene, it's not a picturesque setting; it's raw, it has an element of violence to it. St. Luke tells us that while Jesus was praying His sweat became like great drops of blood (Luke 22:43). Jesus is wrestling with His destiny. Death is no friend to Jesus. Death is an enemy. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). That's what the Bible says. As He prays, the Lord is in agony (Luke 22:44). The enemies of injustice and pride are rising up. They are armed with malice and the Lord Christ has been called to render Himself up into their evil grip. It is Jesus' Father who calls Him to do this.

The Father calls on His Son to bear the sin of man – all of it. Bear it not in an external way, like carrying a sack of bricks, but sin was to be fused to His being (2 Corinthians 5:21). That enemy was going to bring its wretched assault and the thought of it filled Jesus with great alarm. Deathly sorrowful – that’s how Matthew describes Christ’s Spirit (Matthew 26:38). And He seeks His Father. Jesus’ deepest misgivings come tumbling out of His Spirit in prayer. “If there’s another way, if there can be another means by which we can accomplish man’s salvation...” But He knows there isn’t. The cup of suffering is what He was born to drink and drink it He must. “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

The disciples are asleep. Peter, James, and John; the Lord had called them to be watchful, to pray, to be wary of temptation and its allure. “Could you not watch with me one hour?” It is a stinging rebuke. The request is so minor. The situation is so dire, so fraught with danger and the disciples, the inner circle of the Lord’s most trusted followers, are asleep. You and I, we are not strong enough. Our Lord was wrestling with His impending death and His disciples are asleep. Tell me; is it your desire to watch with Him? I know that it is; to stand vigil with the One who claimed you from the ash heap of your sin and prepared a place for you in heaven; that is your desire. I know it. One hour; is it possible for you to see your whole Christian life as that one hour? This moment we are in now, this Lenten month, this hour between your baptism and your death – can you watch with Christ? The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41). Can you watch while you eat, drink, and be merry? Can you watch while filling your soul with the refuse that the world offers (1 John 2:15-17)? Is it possible that you need to repent? In order for you to watch well, you need to repent.

Christ’s church watches with Him. That is who we are. The aged in the faith are the heroic, the lionhearted, the true and tested who have placed themselves in the Garden of Gethsemane and have watched the hour of their lives with Christ. To the best of their ability, by the grace that God affords, the aged have watched. So many have gone before us, living a life of vigilant faith, receiving His cup of blessing, and watching with the Lord Christ. Call to mind those who have inspired you, who have preceded you in death, those who watched with Christ in His hour of agony. Christ the King Lutheran Church is devoted to that task. We will fail but we are determined to give Him what we have to give. Why? Because we love Him. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). He wrestled with enemies that we couldn’t possibly contend with. For us; that cup He drank was the cup of His Father’s wrath against sin. He drained it; and He filled it back up with the Gospel, He filled it with grace, He filled it with His triumph and He gives it to you to drink. Love, Hope, Truth, Justice, Humility, Heaven – you drink His cup.

His Spirit was dreadfully sorrowful. This is why: He was going to be separated from His Father. God the Father was going to treat His beloved Son as though He were the only sinner on the planet. From eternity, the Father and the Son had been bonded and soon the Son would be radically alone. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). That cry of dereliction is the source of Jesus’ sorrow in the Garden. He knows that it is coming. Alone; Jesus went through that radical pain so that you might never be alone. This church is the family of God. The camaraderie that we enjoy is a fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. That bond between us and God is the sweetest thing in your life. Christ made it possible.

Christ made it present. Christ made it our heritage, our right, our blessing (John 1:13). The enemy that Jesus destroyed was death. He wrestled with the merchant of death and by His sacrifice on the cross the Lord crushed Satan's head (Genesis 3:15; Colossians 2:15). Our enemies are defeated. Jesus denied His desire to live at all costs and He was obedient to the Father, obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). Death can't harm you. "Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). That is a Lenten promise. That is most certainly true.