

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 45:3-11, 15
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
THE GOSPEL: Luke 6:27-38

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
February 24, 2019

“Centered in Christ”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Gary R. Garvey
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

I'd like to start off this morning with a little bit of humor and it has to do with the issue of forgiveness, which is so prominent in our text. It has to do with a pastor at the end of the service, and he asked the congregation, “How many of you have forgiven your enemies.” About half of them held up their hands. Then he repeated his question, as half was not enough. As it was past lunch time, this time about 80 percent of the folks held up their hands. Then he asked the question again, “How many have forgiven their enemies? Mrs. Jones, an elderly lady sitting in the back, 107 years old did not raise her hand so the pastor asked her, “Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?” “Well, I don't have any,” she replied, smiling sweetly. “Well Mrs. Jones, this is very unusual. How old are you?” “Why I'm 107, pastor,” she replied. “You know that!” “Oh, Mrs. Jones. What a blessing and a lesson to us you are. Would you please come down to the front of our congregation and tell us all how a person can live to be 107 years old and not have any enemies in the world.” The little sweetheart of an old lady came down to the front of the church, squarely faced the congregation and said, “Well, I outlived all those old hags.” (Laughter)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and our Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen. And so it is. What do you want to be forgiven for? We are to love our enemies, but to you who are listening, I say love your enemy. Love your enemies?

My gosh, I remember as a child, I was looking through the Encyclopedia Britannica with my mother; we didn't have the internet back then to confuse us and so the Encyclopedia Britannica was it. We came across the deserts of the middle east, and I remember thinking, “Why do these people choose to live on a hot desert when they could be living in beautiful Fargo, North Dakota, like my family? And why did they wear all those funny coverings in such a hot place? Then I asked a question, “Where do you think they go to church?” My mother had her answers, may she rest in peace.

That day I learned that we live in a very huge world and that there are many major religions in the world. When I came into the world, there were other major religions here, and when I leave it, they will still be there. That's just the way of it. I remember as a child I resolved to never go to the middle east. Those people are weird. Why would anyone choose to live on a hot desert? Who knew? Of course, it is not very hot here today, is it?

At that time, I had no idea of the wonderful plans the Lord had for me. I may be the only person in this room missing the middle east. I spent so much time there. You see, I was a military man for many years, initially serving in Vietnam in the United States Marine Corps, there we had huge attrition rates. Richard Weigley wrote a book called the American Way of War. In that book, he wrote that Vietnam would be the last war of annihilation and attrition with over 55,000 lost in that war. This attrition included three of my five high school closest and dearest friends, 75 percent of my bootcamp platoon and many others from my unit in Vietnam. My unit in Vietnam was helicopters, and we still get together at least every two years. Most recently we got together in St. Louis, with 750 senior citizens attending from all over the United States. It used to be 900 attending. Many have asked if I would be the one to bury them one day. When my time in Vietnam was finished, I came home and I felt like I had met the enemy. It was December 1971. I left 130-degree Vietnam and I landed in 30 below Fargo, North Dakota. I sat there in

the airport for some four hours trying to figure out what had happened. Because, you see, I was changed. I finally called my family and we went home and hugged and ate welcome home cake. I may have physically been home. In my mind I was still 7000 miles away and I was missing my deceased friends. Had I met the enemy? Had I loved the enemy? Who and what is the enemy? Good Lord, I live in a country where people may turn into terrorists because of political disagreements.

In today's gospel it reads "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." Woohoo! I couldn't sleep nights, but I had the GI bill for benefits, for my continuing education. I was the first in my family to achieve college. With the encouragement of my Concordia college campus pastor, Ernie Mancini, and religious ethics professor, Jim Hoffrenning, forty-three years ago I attended Lutheran Northwestern Theological Seminary. At the seminary I was trying to figure out some things. I wanted to figure out 1. why does God allow suffering in the world? 2. Why did my very young friends have to die? 3. And why not me? I may have been the best target out of all of them. A few of us at the seminary had been war fighters, had flown life-saving medivac missions, too. The seminary had record enrollment that year. I mean, it was Vietnam years and once accepted into the seminary, you were deferred from ever having to serve in the military. We were all trying to figure out God's calling upon our lives in the world, to figure out the world and where to best serve in it. Some professors and students had marched against the war and those who served there. It wasn't always a very pleasant atmosphere to go to school in. I was pretty God and Country aligned and my prayer life improved greatly at the seminary. Later-on, I would be at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Escanaba, Michigan and I was invited to K. I. Sawyer Air Force Base and met a chaplain there. I felt that tugging call once again. It was still parish ministry, but you had to wear funny clothes during the week and deploy with America's sons and daughters when they went forward. When they went forward, it was usually somewhere in the middle east.

Our Gospel today guides that if you get slapped on the cheek, turn the other and allow that one to be slapped, too. And if someone takes your coat, give him your shirt, too. I love that. My dad was a North Dakota state boxing champion and he was very spiritual. Having grown up Catholic, he would occasionally go to the Catholic retreat center for a weekend. No talking allowed. There would be a spirit guide and some scriptures and they would be mentored. It would be an inward journey, a God meets me journey, and when he would come home after that, he would mentor our family. With us, it was usually whatever you do, do not fight. It does not end well. In fact, it makes things worse. You know what? I've been in the Jewish concentration camps in Dachau, Germany and the Spiegel Center in Israel, too. I've always wondered why the Jewish community back in World War II did not man the arms and fight against the Germans who were exterminating them. Why didn't they fight it? I've also hosted holocaust remembrance services in our base communities in honor of fallen Jews who lost their lives in that horrible time in life. I've gone to the synagogues and read the names of the fallen with the Rabbis. Why didn't they fight? Maybe they couldn't, maybe they wouldn't. Why, My Lord, why?

I don't like war and fighting. I love the Lord and I love people. But sometimes you just have to question, don't you? Is this what the scriptures are advocating? Without getting graphic, I believe I have witnessed the same thing, the same kind of atrocities as the Jews in Kuwait. After the craziness ended in Kuwait, we gave the pallet loads of clothes and food to help them rebuild. Several rotations of airplanes full of humanitarian relief and manpower to distribute it all. At American Lutheran Church, you all are a blessing to have richly given to benevolence in so many ways and shapes and forms. In Bahrain one day, a Kuwaiti family with a baby stroller stopped me to thank me and the US service women and men for saving their country and for saving them. Never had an experience like that before. Every summer, Dianne and I haul bandages and boxes to the ELCA rendezvous point to give to others, all stuff that has been put together by American Lutheran Church to take care of so much more. Thank you to American Lutheran Church.

Give to everyone who asks you. Give. Be merciful. And so we are called to treat others the way we want to be treated, says the Gospel. Pastor Lowell is making a big push in our congregation for benevolence, and rightly so. Please remember to pray for him and his family across the miles, in light of his dad's situation. The Gospel goes on to say, if you love and give to those who love you in totally predictable comfort sources in your life, what is that? Even sinners love those who love them. Give to your enemies, give to others that need it more. That is called mercy. Of course; we are to love and care for our families. Well, of course. It is interesting to me that in the ten commandments we go from love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, to love your neighbor as yourself. It would seem that the second commandment should be loving our family, and the neighbor should be third. Just saying! If our neighbor is the concern of the second commandment, then does that push our benevolence even higher in our family budgeting of time, volunteering, and funding priorities? Martin Luther referred to us as both saints and sinners. As sinners, he said we are guilty in thought, word and deed. Oh my goodness! Well, we are saints too, right? Trying our best to do the right things always, almost always. Not enough. Forgive me, Lord! So then, we are to love our enemies, love those sinners, folks like us apparently. Apparently; saints and sinners all love to be around those who love them. Well, of course they do! Those who make their life a more pleasant place to be, in spite of their day-in challenges and difficulties. You never know what one is going through until you have walked in their shoes, do you? So treat everyone the way you want to be treated. Love them whether they love you or not. God is alive and well and working in the year of our Lord 2019, and He knows what He is doing.

Today's Gospel calls us to be merciful. There is a reward for the merciful laid up in the heavens. And we are called to not be judgmental. We are not called to preside over judgment. We have a creator God who covers that department oh so beautifully. I mentioned I had been in the middle east. As an Air Force chaplain, I served in Washington D.C. for some seven years. I was also an on-scene responder at the pentagon's 9/11. In the middle east, I was in Egypt, two times to Saudi Arabia, two times to Iraq, and I spent a year in Turkey. They all are their own story. In Turkey, it was Operation Provide Comfort, where we had three bases, Zakhu, Iraq, Diyarbakir and Adana, Turkey. All in the land of those dangerous Muslims. I'll tell you a little story. We had a Muslim supply guy by the name of Kershott. I had great relationship with everybody all over that community. It was just a great community to be in. Kershott had a high holy man, who had written a book, come to do his house. He wanted me to come over on Sunday and that created some logistical issues, because even though I did not serve the mass, I did the Catholic service at 8:30 in the morning and then I did the Protestant service at 10, then I did the black Gospel service at 12:30 and then with the kids I did the prayer and praise service at 7. Kershott wanted me to come and meet this Muslim high holy man, and I really wanted to meet him. So, Kershott had to come get me at the air station and I jumped in his car, had my collar on, and we rolled 13 miles into Diyarbakir, Turkey, pulled up in front of his apartment complex. We went in and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. We went in the door to his apartment and there was a mountain of shoes; apparently you have to take your shoes off to meet a high holy man, so I took me shoes off, size 16, set them on top of the pile. They looked like the box the other shoes came in. I was escorted past about 20 women who were in the small, small kitchen, through to the living room where about 20-30 men were sitting bowing down before this high holy man. He was sitting there and he kind of glowed like something you would read about in the Bible. The protocol apparently for a Muslim is, you come in and you kiss the ring, but you never come in taller than the sitting high holy man. But I'm afraid that is not the way we do it in America, so I went in and gave him a respectful greeting and he immediately sat me to his left, which put me with no kind of exit point through a lot of people and the furthest across two rooms. Then we got into the visit. Most of it was in Arabic. The visit went on and I was asked about Jesus and the immaculate birth and we were having all kinds of discussions. They wanted to know if I had read the Koran and, of course, I had. And we had some discussions, but because most of it was in Arabic and because they were getting so excited

and I didn't know what they were saying, I began to get nervous. I'm one deep in 50 people and I'm a long way from an evacuation point. And I'm four stories up. I've been a Marine in Vietnam and I'm thinking holy cats, I can see it now. Something happens and I grab the high holy man and throw him out the window and I can see the newspapers the next day: High holy man descends on the city of Diyarbakir in a sea of glass. I did not want to do that, so I'm sitting there trying to figure out what I'm going to do. Suddenly, this guy leans over and he says, "Do you know so-and-so over on the base." Yes, I knew him. And he said, "That's my son. Would you mind if I came out to the base and visited you at the chapel?" "Not only would I not mind, I'd make you your coffee better than you make it," I told him. The arrangements were made and he came, and he was the first of many. They all wanted my books; they would walk out with 5-6 books from my library and go on their way. We always had very pleasant visits. My life in the land of the Muslims. Around Diyarbakir, Turkey, there were hundreds of churches that had formerly been Christian churches, which had either been converted to mosques or just gone to ruin. These were Muslim people, they were God's people. They saw things differently than I did. I was not trying to shove anything down their throats. I was just trying to appreciate God's creation and I enjoyed the middle east. I saw it like the Old Testament on steroids. I need to move along here, but I think that kind of speaks to so often we jump the gun and we get critical and we get judgmental about things. There are so many things that we run past and we need to slow down and we need to ask for God's forgiveness, because you never know what someone is going through until you have walked in their shoes. And these folks, they lose children and everything else over there and they have their challenges, too. Amen and Amen!

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds on Christ Jesus.