

“Yes, do love your enemies!” Mt 5:38-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. “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. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Today we continue looking at the Sermon on the Mount and what Jesus was teaching His disciples. As we reflect on our today’s reading, we need to remember that all these commands Jesus gives as His own explanation of what it means for us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

In other words, He is not simply sharing ideas about what we may do, what He says is not optional, He commands us – ‘but I tell you’ – what we as children of our heavenly Father must do.

I recently had this lovely conversation with a brother in Christ, and he said that it has always scared him to read the words of Jesus in the New Testament. It is not hard to relate to what he said.

Just listen what we have in our today’s reading: “I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Most people like at least some parts of Biblical message. As long, as they can pick and choose what they like. As long, as they can stay in control. But it is different with this Jesus. He is God, He sets the rules for this game that we call Christian life. And some of what He commands are scary words, do you agree?

Today we’ll do two things. We’ll try to understand this business about our enemies and then what it means to love them, and how can we possibly do it.

First about our enemies. This is important that we understand how we as sinful human beings operate. Let’s look at what happened in the very beginning and it will help us to understand what is going on today.

When God brought Eve to Adam, what did Adam say? ‘Flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones’. Now, just a few verses later we can read how first human beings turned their backs to God and sin came into this world.

When God came to Adam and asked about what had happen, what did Adam say? ‘This woman, whom you gave to be with me... she did it’. That’s her fault. Now let’s try to understand what was going on, for this will explain what is still

going on today. When people turned away from God and didn't listen to Him, things fell apart. Adam realized that there was a problem. But he didn't realize that the problem was in him. Instead he blamed Eve.

And Eve knew that there was a problem, and she blamed the serpent. What had happened? Before the Fall there was a wonderful harmony in all relationships, after – brokenness and divisions had come in.

How does it work today? All people realize that there is something wrong with this world. Everyone knows it. But we don't realize that the main problem is – us, within us. Therefore, whom do we tend to blame? That's right, – others.

This is how we all experience this brokenness and divisions today. On the one hand, there are people, who are like us, think like us and act like us, and then there are those, who are not like us, don't think like us and don't act like us.

What happens? We form our groups, or choose to belong to certain groups, and we separate ourselves from other groups, and then we often blame others for whatever has gone wrong.

And, woe to you, if you belong to the other group! Then it doesn't matter who you are or what kind of person you are, you can easily be labeled as the enemy, and therefore you are to be blamed for all the wrongs.

Can we come up with some real-life examples? Sure, we can. Unfortunately, we have more examples than needed. As you know I was born in Latvia. And at that time Latvia was a part of the former Soviet Union.

So, we were Latvians under the rule of Communist Russia. Which group was to be blamed for everything? Sure, Russians. They were the cause of all problems. If you labeled someone Russian, you could put all blame on them. And you could treat them as enemies.

What about here? In our own past in Barossa? There was a certain time when if you were German, then you could be blamed for anything. You were the enemy. And often people were treated as enemies.

What about today? If you are on political right, you will be blamed by the left as guilty in everything, and vice versa. Just look at how politicians and social activists attack one another with all their passion.

Why? Because they have found the group that is to be blamed for everything. No holding back, hate them, destroy them! They deserve it! They are the enemy!

Now, let's step on some toes. What about our church? Sure, we draw the line between us and those who do not follow Jesus. Who are to be blamed for all problems in our society? Sure, those unbelievers. But is it true?

Now, within the church, do we have this division into 'we and they'? You tell me. I still can't get my mind around how our brothers and sisters from other Lutheran congregations could say:

“I would love to come to your services, but ... I belong to that...” They and us. Us and they. What about the LCA? Do we have ‘us and they’? Can anyone name the elephant in the room? Ordination question, yes.

It has created so deep a division in our church. They and us. We and that group. After the last synod, there was a dinner. A young pastor who didn’t know too many of the people present went and sat at the table with nine others.

In a few minutes, they had found that he belongs to the opposite group. I am ashamed to repeat what insults and threats he had to hear. And probably it could go either way. You see, I am talking about us, Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ. We and they. We and our enemies.

What about ourselves? What about those who are traditional people versus contemporary people. What about those who want to listen to the word of God and those who want to do things?

What about those who belong to some groups in congregation and those who don’t. Division, groups... We and they, they and we. We could go on and on. And I am sure you could come up with many other examples.

And in this our miserable situation Jesus says to us: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you!” What do you mean, Jesus?! Enemies?!

This is what He means. Jesus shows what it means to love. We are overtaken by the idea that love is mainly an emotion. Jesus shows that true love is a decision and action. We decide to love someone, and we care for and live for that person.

Our sin separates us from God. It is ugly and makes us ugly. But our God has decided to never stop loving us and caring for us. It’s not that He looks at our sinful hearts with warm emotions and says: “Wow, what a lovely people!”

No, He knows what we carry in our hearts. And still, He decided to come to us as one of us, as Jesus from Nazareth, to overcome the division between His fallen and rebellious creatures, us, and Himself. To make us one.

Jesus came and He didn’t resist the evil. He didn’t play the game of ‘we and they’. He chose to love those who were killing Him and He prayed for His murderers. He refused to cause more divisions, to create more ‘we and they’.

And by His death and resurrection God reconciled us to Himself. He did it. He loved you when you still were His enemies. He revealed that the problem of this world is not in others, it is in us.

We are to be blamed. But Jesus took all the blame upon Himself, He took it away. You see, there is no need to blame anyone anymore. What now? Now we are free to focus on loving all people, it doesn’t matter how they treat us.

This doesn’t mean that we need to neglect the reality that people may be in error, then may have wrong and harmful ideas, they can be acting in destructive and hostile ways. We live in broken world.

When this happens, we are to gently correct them, and gently lead them to the truth, but we as Christians are never ever to treat anyone as our enemies. In fact, the further someone is from Jesus, the more they need our love.

You know, it is easy to care for people who are like you, your group. But if that is all that we do, tell me, how are we different from everyone else? Unbelievers care for their own, muslims care for their own, even gangs care for their own.

If we love and care for our own only, how are we different? Remember what Jesus did! When you were still His enemies, He chose to love you, and by His love He has made you His brothers and sisters.

Now Jesus sends you to do the same. Instead of creating more division, let's create unity, instead of fences, let us build bridges, instead of hating your enemies, let us love them and care for them.

For when we choose to love the others, when we do love our enemies, we begin to overcome all the divisions created by sin and devil, and we begin to bring healing and restoration and peace among human creatures.

When you do it, it may not lead to quick results, it almost never does. And we are not called to do it so that we can enjoy quick results and praise ourselves for our good works.

We are called to love our enemies, the others, because this is how our Heavenly Father begins to restore His creation. He is perfect, and "he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust". And you as His children are to treat others the same way as He does.

Today I challenge you. Think who your 'enemy' is – someone who is not in your 'group'. And then think how you could love them, and care for them. And if you wonder why should we do it, then remember who you are.

Jesus has given you a new identity. A child of God. A beloved child of your heavenly Father. This is who you are. Jesus doesn't speak about you in terms of 'me and you', He speaks about us.

You are united with Jesus by means of His Holy Spirit. Jesus doesn't look at you – 'o, those sinners', He looks at you, – 'my brother, my sister'. And because you truly are children of your heavenly Father, you are to live as such.

Entire humanity now is your group. And as your Father desires each one of His lost children to come home, so should we. Let's decide today to love our enemies, and let's love our enemies. And wherever divisions reign, may the Holy Spirit Himself bring healing and unity using us as His messengers.

Peace of God that surpasses all our understanding, keep your minds and hearts in Jesus Christ. Amen.