

**Sermon – 7<sup>th</sup> Epiphany**  
**Luke 6:27-38**  
**February 24, 2019**

**“Dear Alma”**

In June 1946, Alma Gerecke received a most remarkable letter at her St. Louis home. It was from Germany, where her husband, a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod pastor, was stationed. It was postmarked Nuremburg, and signed by 21 of the most notorious men in the world at the time – former members of the Nazi Party who were on trial for war crimes. They wrote because a rumor was circulating that her husband, Henry, who’d served them as chaplain was to be given the opportunity to return home, before their trial ended. They wrote asking Alma to allow Henry to remain until their fate was determined by the international court.

Alma didn’t hesitate, and wrote telling her husband to stay and finish his ministry with these men. Faith and obedience to Christ who said that even one’s enemies deserve to be cared for spiritually motivated her as it had Henry. As did the fact these men, most of whom would be convicted and sentenced to die for the human suffering they helped orchestrate, *could* write this;

*“Frau Gerecke...our dear Chaplain...is necessary for us not only as a minister but also as the thoroughly good man that he is – surely we need not describe him as such to his own wife. We simply have come to love him. It is impossible for any other man than him to break through the walls that have been built up around us, in a spiritual sense even stronger than a material one. Therefore, please leave him with us. Certainly you will bring this sacrifice and we shall be deeply indebted to you. We send you our best wishes for you and your family! God be with you.*

How does one respond to a letter that expresses something one does not ordinarily associate with architects of the “Third Reich” – “love?” There is only one way – through Christ. About the same time as the Nuremburg trials, English writer C.S. Lewis wrote a book entitled “*Mere Christianity*.” In it Lewis wrote “*Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we had during the war. And then to mention the subject at all is to be met with howls of anger...I wonder how you would feel about forgiving the SS if you were a Pole or a Jew?*” To which Lewis offered a very candid admission – he was not writing to say what he could do – but what Christianity is and what God can do, and has done. And right in the middle of Christianity Lewis positioned Luke 6:27-38 - “*I tell you who hear me, love your enemies*”

Lewis goes on to say this however; “*When you start mathematics you don’t begin with calculus, you begin with simple addition. In the same way, if (you) really want (and it depends on wanting) to learn how to forgive, perhaps you’d better start with something easier than the Gestapo. One might start with one’s spouse, or parents, or children...that will probably keep us busy for the moment.*” For Lewis, and quite obviously for Pastor Henry Gerecke, the command of Jesus to “*love your enemy, do good to those who hate you*” didn’t mean, and this is important, that you must “*be fond of them*” or reduce in any way the loathing you feel for evil or cruelty.

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Nor does it mean that one ought to remove accountability for actions and appropriate punishment for them. God does punish sin – all of it. None of us can, with any honesty that is, claim we approve of all that we have thought, said and done. Self-examination, the sort we begin with each week here on our knees, is intended to reveal to us what we are in the eyes of God. To love someone, as we might love ourselves, doing unto them as we'd want done to us, as Jesus says in our lesson today, means honesty.

You can't, as the popular saying goes "*hate the sin but love the sinner*" until you realize that's pretty much what you do every day – to yourself. Your salvation and mine is utterly dependent on this – Jesus didn't "*love you as he loved himself*" – he didn't simply "*do unto you as he would have wanted you to do unto him*" – he loved you more than himself, and gave himself as an atoning sacrifice for your sins, not his. That's where we must begin with passages like this from Luke. It's the only way we can approach them and accept them as not just good advice nor lofty but utterly unattainable law, but good news.

As eleven of the prisoners who'd signed a letter five months earlier asking Alma Gerecke to let her husband stay with them met with their pastor for the last time – the day of their executions, he received honest, urgent confessions of sin. To which, with joy but also trembling he pronounced, just as his Lord commanded him to, assurance of pardon. For truly guilty and now condemned men their "last supper" was their Lord's – his "*last will and testament for sinners.*"

Paul in Romans 5 said; "*at the right time... God showed his love for us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" That doesn't mean "*in the nick of time*" as with a condemned prisoner making a hasty last minute confession, it means at the perfect time, and that means today, "while" we are enemies of God due to our sin. Colleagues later criticized Henry Gerecke for communing these men, but he reminded them that Christian absolution – the power of the forgiveness Jesus has invested his church with, isn't a declaration of "not guilty" – it's the pronouncement that for those truly in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation.

Why else do you confess your sins week after week if you're not guilty of something? Crimes against humanity – no, but resisting the will of God, or hoarding the abundance of God, or truncating the grace of God – well, on that I must let you and your Lord decide! But I can say this, to myself as well – forgiveness is complicated but not impossible, it is costly, but not unattainable. So receive it again, truly take hold of it today, and let its power work in you to do that which you cannot do yourself, but the Savior who lives in you can – because he already has. It's not easy, it's not logical, but it's Christianity, what you have come to believe, what makes you unique, and, from a judge whose court is truly supreme, an heir with Christ to a throne of grace. AMEN