7 A

MDP of God

The preacher's Sunday sermon was Forgive Your Enemies. Toward the end of the service, He asked his congregation, "how many of you have forgiven your enemies"?

About half held up their hands. *He spoke a little longer-- in fact he gave another sermon*---He then repeated his question.*, this time about 80 percent held up their hands.* He spoke a little longer---in fact he gave another sermon--He then repeated his question again-- *As it was past lunchtime*. All responded, except one small elderly lady.

"Mrs. Jones?" inquired the preacher, *Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?*”          
      "I don't have any." she replied. smiling sweetly.

"Mrs. Jones, That is very unusual. How old are you?" "Ninety-three," she replied.     
      "Oh Mrs. Jones, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. Would you please come down in front of this congregation and tell us all how a person can live ninety-three years and not have an enemy in the world."   
         
      The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, faced the congregation, and said "**I outlived the old hags."**

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My dear friends—our readings today speak of forgivenenss

Our 1st reading today from Leviticus said, “You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart”

It goes on to say, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Then in the gospel Jesus says, “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, that you may be children of your heavenly Father”

These are readings from God’s Word that our nation need to hear today

Because there seems to be so much hatred all around us

Racial conflicts seem to be worse today than they have been for 50 years

*Politics has always been pretty ugly*—**but now it’s becoming hard to recognize our country**

In the past—*it seems to me anyway*—while political battles were fought—*when elections were over everyone tried to pull together for the good of the country*

But now there seems to be no willingness to work together

There are families where people won’t talk to each other because of who someone else voted for

We see a lot of bitterness and hatred all around us

And of course –we don’t want to take the approach of that lady in the story I started with—*just outliving enemies doesn’t bring peace into our lives*

We want to live as Jesus taught—we want to live by the law of love

And we need to remember that Jesus didn’t just teach forgiveness—He really demonstrated it when on the cross He prayed, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do”

And He prayed that for people who beat Him—who spit on Him – who kicked Him

He prayed it for people who gave Him an agonizing scourging at the pillar---they would have used a flagrum—that’s a whip that has three cords and has bone and metal imbedded—**it’s designed to rip the flesh**

*It was an agonizing punishment—*and yet, Jesus prayed for the people who did that to Him- “*Father forgive them, they know not what they do”*

Certainly, there are people around us where we can’t help but wonder—“do they understand what they’re doing? How can they have that attitude?”

And while we can certainly be frustrated with people—we do have a choice---we can choose to hate them—or we can choose to love them

Because love isn’t a warm fuzzy feeling—love is a choice

We can choose to love people we disagree with—we don’t understand—who have different attitudes then we do/// ---*even when we feel their attitudes are destructive*

**Jesus did**—and with His saving grace we can love that way too

In fact many Christian saints went to their deaths while praying for their persecutors

And so folks—we have a choice

We can choose to hate people we disagree with—or we can pray for them

We can be bitter and resentful about people we feel are destroying the country---or we can choose to be a witness to love and perhaps change their hearts

Because the fact is—if we hate others –*we’re not going to lead them to the God of love*

If you look at the Acts of the Apostles—Acts chapter 7—you’ll see the martyrdom of St Stephen—the 1st Christian martyr

He dies while praying for the people stoning him to death

And one of the people who was involved in the death of Stephen—was a man by the name of Saul the Pharisee

Saul later became known as Paul the Apostle

*Did the prayers of Stephen*—prayers for people who were in the process of killing him---**is that what led to Saul being converted?**

We can’t know for certain—but it sure looks that way

Stephen took the words of Jesus to heart and prayed for his enemies

*Jesus didn’t just preach love of enemies*—**He demonstrated it on the cross**

My friends—let’s follow the example of Jesus

Let’s follow the example of Stephen

Let’s put the teaching of Jesus into practice in our lives

We live in a nation filled with hate—filled with bitterness and resentment

But you don’t have to hate—you don’t have to be bitter—you don’t have to be resentful

In fact you can choose to love—you can choose to pray for people you disagree with—you can choose to allow the love of Jesus to shine in your life so that others who are living in the darkness of hate and sin---will see that light and come to Jesus

My friends—*let’s choose to pray for our country*---let’s choose to love those we disagree with – lets choose to allow the light of Jesus to shine through us so that people will come out of the darkness and come to know the God who is love