**18th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

The acid test of love is not whether we love our friends, but whether we love our enemies. A great Saint asked, "How do we know whether a person abides in God and is sincere in his Christian faith? There is no other way of ascertaining this than by examining the person’s life to see if he loves his enemies. Where there is love for one’s enemy, there also is God." That is the great test of whether we are in tune with God; for that is what God Himself does. He sends His rain on the just and the unjust. Chesterton said once, "Love means to love that which is unlovable, or it is no virtue at all."

But to love our enemies in a world like ours seems highly impractical. To love your enemy — some object — is to allow him to take advantage of you. To love your enemy is to let him step all over you.

So we thought, until psychology came along and taught us a few things about hostility and hostile people. Specifically, they told us that a hostile person hates because he fears you will strike him; so, to protect himself, he strikes first. He is hostile because he expects vilification and hatred from you. The last thing he expects is love. So if, instead of hatred, you give him love, you will disarm him. Love is what he craves more than anything else. Love is the only thing that can destroy his hostility.

But does God expect us to love the sin and the evil people do? Of course not. He expects us to hate the sin but to love the sinner. How can one distinguish between the sin and the sinner? Yet we make this same distinction every day with ourselves. We do bad things; we commit egregious errors. We hate the errors we commit, but we continue to love ourselves. Do the same with others, said Jesus. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Hate the sin; love the sinner. Someone expressed it this way, "To love one’s enemy does not mean to love the mud in which the pearl lies, but to love the pearl that lies in the mud."

Why must I love my enemy? That I may be a child of the Father. "Love your enemies … and you will be sons of the Most High." God wants us to be what He is. He loves His enemies. He does good to those who hate Him. He prepares green pastures for us when our just reward would be a desert. He leads us by still waters when we might have expected a land of drought. While we were yet sinners, God loved us and died for us. Shortly before He died Jesus told His disciples: "A new commandment I give unto you; that you love one another, even as I have loved you."

Thus, two major reasons why we should love our enemies is first that they need love; and, second, love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.

A third reason is fairly obvious. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate. Only love can break the vicious circle. A man once bought a farm and was walking the bounds of his new property when he met his next door neighbor. "Don’t look now," said the neighbor, "but when you bought this piece of ground, you also bought a lawsuit with me. Your fence is ten feet over on my land."

Now this is a classic opening for a feud that could go on for centuries and create generations of enemies. But the new owner smiled and said, "I thought I’d find some friendly neighbors here, and I’m going to. And you’re going to help me. Move the fence where you want it, and send me the bill. You’ll be satisfied and I’ll be happy."

Well, the fence was never moved, and the potential enemy was never the same again. He became a friendly neighbor. Love quenched the fire of hatred.

The ultimate reason why we should love our enemies is expressed in the words of Jesus: "Love your enemies … and you will be sons of the Most High." We are all potential sons of God. Through love that potentiality becomes actuality. We must love our enemies because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of His holiness.