

## As He Loves Us

*By Linda Rex*

**May 15, 2022, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter**—Many years ago, while sitting on the banks of the Des Moines River, I chatted with a Vietnam veteran who was helping with a display of the traveling wall of honor. My memories of the war in Vietnam were very vague since I was very young when it occurred. This man, seasoned by conflict and suffering, was frank and relentless in his descriptions of the event, as he sought to acquaint me with a little of his experiences during the war.

I'm more and more convinced that the struggles our veterans face when returning from conflict are often rooted in the reality that God never meant for us to have to experience the horror and atrocities of war. Nor did he intend for us to experience betrayal, subterfuge, corruption, or destruction. The consequences of war are so great—and yet we still use war as the means by which we solve our disagreements with one another.

The war occurring currently in Ukraine is a good example of humans continuing to use unhealthy and unholy ways of resolving their differences. And what is really tragic about this conflict is what is being said with regards to the Christian beliefs of those involved. Is war ever an appropriate solution to differences between followers of Christ?

The struggle many have with following Christ is that his response to conflict and differences of opinion is often the opposite of what ours is as his followers. In the gospel reading for this Sunday, John 13:31–35, we hear Jesus telling us that the way others see God's love is by the way followers of Christ love one another. If we resolve conflict by accelerating it and using weapons and warfare, we are not reflecting the nature of the God who is love nor are we being Christ-like, for our Lord allowed himself to be crucified by his enemies rather than sending his legions of angels to fight on his behalf.

The first reading for this Sunday, Acts 11:1–18 (NASB), describes when Peter went to Jerusalem to meet with the other believers and was accused of defiling himself by having fellowship with Gentiles, the people excluded from Jewish worship. Peter explained how the Spirit had given him a vision of unclean animals, telling him three times to kill and eat. Peter had never eaten anything unclean before, and said so. But the Spirit told him, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." Peter then discovered that what was more important than his religious rules was his relationship with God and those with whom God was calling himself into relationship.

The Jewish rules at that time regarding what a person could eat or not eat and do or not do, created a rigid wall that kept out anyone who was not of their own background and beliefs. God had called the people of ancient Israel to be witnesses to the world of who God was, but they had been isolating themselves from the world instead. For Peter to walk into the home of a Gentile required a commitment to Christ and to his Spirit that superseded his religious background and belief system. Was he willing to meet these Gentiles on the common ground of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Was he willing to be obedient to the Spirit rather than following his rigid list of rules?

As he stood before his Jewish accusers, Peter explained his reasoning for having obeyed the Spirit's instruction to go to this Gentile's home and preach the gospel. As soon as he spoke the words of life—the gospel of Jesus Christ—to them, the Spirit descended upon his listeners just as the Spirit descended upon the disciples on Pentecost. Peter remembered that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit and said, "who was I that I could stand in God's way?" We don't choose our siblings in Christ—God does. And we need to learn how to live in right relationship with them, just as Jesus brought us into right relationship with the Father in the Spirit.

This is why Jesus so often stressed that we are to love one another. In his conversation with his disciples before he died, Jesus emphasized that his disciples need to love one another. Our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is a tangible sign of God's love expressed to all humanity in Jesus' self-offering.

Jesus laid down his life for us, setting aside for a time the privileges of divinity to join us in our humanity so that he might draw us into the circle of love between the Father, Son, and Spirit. What God has done for us in Christ, we are compelled by the love of Christ to do for one another, and to do for those who are not followers of Christ as well. To not love God and to not love one another is to be inhumane—to be not truly human as we were intended by God to be. Every one of us was created to live in loving, other-centered relationship with God and one another, no matter who we are. To not live in that way is to not truly be ourselves.

This leaves us in a difficult position as followers of Christ. Jesus tells us that the evidence of our being his followers is our love for one another. When a brother or sister is not walking in love, they are walking in darkness rather than in the light. As people of light, how do we respond in the most loving, light-bearing way possible to the deeds of darkness? What does it mean to be a peace-maker in a circumstance of war?

The evil one always seeks to divide, disrupt, kill, destroy and steal. His kingdom is not the one we are members of, so his ways must not be our ways. We must, as followers of Christ, follow the lead of the Spirit as he draws people together rather than ripping them apart. God loves us and gives us air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat even when we reject and ignore him. Can we do any less for our brothers and sisters, no matter who they are? What is the Spirit saying to you and to me today about the people in our lives? Are we building walls to keep others out, or are we welcoming them with open arms into the fellowship of Christ?

*Heavenly Father, forgive us our petty squabbles and disagreements, our refusal to live with one another in peace. Forgive us for looking down on others and for refusing to make room for them in our lives. Grant us the grace to love others in the same way you have loved us, by laying down your life in your Son Jesus. Move in us by your Spirit to truly love one another, for Christ's sake. Amen.*

*"Therefore when he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.' "* John 13:31–35 NASB