



A Brother's Love

Worship Resources Mennonite Heritage Sunday, October 27, 2002

October 27, 2002 - Proper 25 and Mennonite Heritage Sunday

Theme: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul. Matthew 22:37

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1; I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

Call to Worship or Affirming our Faith

L: As we gather to worship, we confess:

P: To honor and love anything above or beside you, O God, is idolatry.

L: As we sing hymns of praise, we proclaim:

P: You alone, O God, are to be honored and loved before all things.

L: As we lift our hearts in prayer, we confess:

P: Worshiping and serving you, O God, is the first and foremost commandment.

L: As we examine our deepest loyalties, we confess and proclaim:

P: That we do love you, Lord, with all our heart, mind and soul!

--Adapted from The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck, p. 338 (Herald Press, 1978)

Reading

Elizabeth answered her interrogators with clarity and strength. Asked whether she found salvation in baptism, she replied, "No, my lords, all the water in the sea could not save me; but salvation is in Christ, and he has commanded me to love God my Lord above all things, and my neighbor as myself."

When the authorities arrested Elizabeth in the Friesian village of Leeuwarden in 1549, they found incriminating evidence—a Latin New Testament. She was identified as a "teacheress" and accused of being Menno Simon's wife. Elizabeth's confession remained strong, though she was tortured and sentenced "to be drowned in a bag,"

"Elizabeth truly did love the Lord her God with all her heart, mind and soul—above life itself!

--From the *Martyrs Mirror*, pp. 481-483. This story is also told in *On Fire for Christ* by Dave and Neta Jackson (Herald Press, 1989), and in *No Permanent City* by Harry Loewen, (Herald Press, 1993).

Story: A Brother's Love

Loving God with our whole heart, mind and strength is to be translated into loving our neighbor. This, Jesus said, is the second greatest commandment. Here is a story where the love of neighbor—in this case, a biological brother—led a man to sacrifice his own life to save his brother's. This narrative may be used in a sermon illustration or as a children's story.

Many people in Russia suffered terribly during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the Civil War that followed. German-speaking Mennonites in Ukrainian villages were among those targeted by revolutionaries and anarchists. Eventually 22,000 Mennonites escaped and migrated to Canada, Brazil and Paraguay. Those who remained were forced to live under Vladimir Lenin's Communist government. The Sudermann twins in Halbstadt, a Mennonite village in the Molotchna Settlement of South Russia, experienced the violence of revolution and civil war.

Bill and Jake Sudermann were young men, identical twin brothers, who lived in the Ukrainian village of Halbstadt. Most people couldn't tell one red-haired, freckled brother from the other. When customers brought a new car from Sudermann's Opal dealership, or brought a car to in their shop to be repaired, they didn't know if they were talking to Jake or Bill. Only their parents, their siblings—and of course, Bill's wife and children—knew the difference. They had once tried fooling Bill's wife, while she was his fiancé, but it didn't work!

Bill and Jake were topnotch mechanics. They worked long hours to serve their customers well and to build their business. But, when the revolution broke out everything changed. Families were terrorized, women were raped, men were shot, and homes were looted and burned. So far Bill and Jake had survived, but they knew that could change anytime.

Surely, they thought of their ancestors who had come to the Ukraine in 1789 at the invitation of Catherine the Great. The Russian Czarina was looking for "excessively good farmers," to settle the fertile, but uncultivated steppes of this region. When she discovered industrious Mennonites in Danzig and Prussia, who were willing to move, she offered them exemption from military service. The immigrants, in turn, transformed the Ukraine into the breadbasket of Russia. Some of their kin migrated to North America in the 1870s when Russia withdrew the exemption from military service. Those who remained continued to flourish and prosper. None of those early colonists could have imagined the horror that had now been unleashed on the thriving villages and estates of South Russia.

That horror soon came to Halbstadt. A group of revolutionaries, a contingent of the notorious band of Nestor Makhno, entered the village one evening and arrested the brothers. The revolutionaries had set up headquarters in the brewer's large house and used the cellar as a prison. Before long the basement was full of men and boys-neighbors, friends, and relatives. It didn't take long to find out what was to become of them. Each day the captors called the name of a prisoner and dragged him up the cellar steps. Minutes later the prisoners would hear a gunshot from the direction of a sandpit nearby. Each day the suspense grew for those who remained.

The men and boys prepared to die. They prayed and they wept, thinking of their families. Families . . . Jake thought of Bill's family. Bill had a wife and four children. Jake was single. What could he do for them? Yes, there was something he could do. His thoughts were interrupted when the door at the top of the steps was thrown open, and a rough voice called the next name on the list, William Sudermann. The time had come. This was to be Bill's last day on earth. As in a trance, Bill reluctantly got to his feet. He had seen his family for the last time. He would not see his children grow up. He would not see his grandchildren.

But before he could move forward, his twin brother stood in his way. "Let me go instead," Jake whispered. "You have a family. If you survive they will need you. I'm single. I don't have anyone to take care of." Before Bill could react, Jake was at the top of the steps. Moments later, Bill and the other prisoners heard the dreaded and predictable sound-a gunshot from the direction of the sandpit.

Before sunset that same day, the White Army entered the village, and the revolutionaries vanished. The men in the brewer's cellar were set free. Before going home to see the family he had thought he would never see again, Bill walked to the sandpit. He could see mounds of sand, the graves of the murdered men-his friends and neighbors. Some bodies were only partly buried in sand. And then he saw it. A hand . . . a hand with red hair and freckles.

Sending

Today in our worship, we have confessed our deepest love for God. As we go from here, let our words and deeds proclaim to the world that we love God with heart, mind and soul. Amen

These resources were written by John E. Sharp, director of the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee.