

God's Mercy and Love Will Always Lead us Home to Him

Blessings to you on this "Laetare Sunday" as we rejoice as Easter is now 3 weeks away, but also rejoice in God's mercy as we think about this week's Gospel of the Prodigal Son. (Laetare coming from the antiphon "Rejoice, O Jerusalem" from Isaiah 66:10 used in the entrance antiphon which would take the place of the opening hymn. Hence the more festive rose colored vestments this weekend.

This week's Gospel is perhaps the most familiar, but the power of mercy over anger and hate can never be emphasized enough, especially in our current climate.

About 6 years ago, I used in a homily a story from World War II a powerful story of mercy that I found.

The story was of two pilots.

The American pilot, Charles Brown, glanced outside his cockpit and froze. He and his co-pilot were looking at a gray German Messerschmitt fighter hovering just three feet off their wingtip. It was five days before Christmas 1943, and the fighter had closed in on their crippled American B-17 bomber for the kill.

The B-17 pilot was a 21-year-old West Virginia farm boy on his first combat mission. His bomber had been shot to pieces by swarming fighters, and his plane was alone in the skies above Germany. Half his crew was wounded, and the tail gunner was dead, his blood frozen in icicles over the machine guns.

But when Brown and his co-pilot, Spencer "Pinky" Luke, looked at the fighter pilot again, something odd happened. The German didn't pull the trigger. He nodded at Brown instead. What happened next was one of the most remarkable acts of chivalry recorded during World War II. Years later, Brown would track down his would-be executioner for a reunion that reduced both men to tears.

2nd Lt. Franz Stigler was the German who jumped into his fighter that chilly December day in 1943. And he initially did so out of revenge.

Stigler wasn't just any fighter pilot. He was an ace. One more kill and he would win The Knight's Cross, Germany's highest award for valor.

Yet Stigler was driven by something deeper than glory. His older brother, August, was a fellow Luftwaffe pilot who had been killed earlier in the war. American pilots had killed Stigler's comrades and were bombing his country's cities.

Stigler was standing near his fighter on a German airbase when he heard a bomber's engine. Looking up, he saw a B-17 flying so low it looked like it was going to land. As the bomber disappeared behind some trees, Stigler tossed his cigarette aside, saluted a ground crewman and took off in pursuit.

As Stigler's fighter rose to meet the bomber, he decided to attack it from behind. He climbed behind the sputtering bomber, squinted into his gun sight and placed his hand on the trigger. He was about to fire when he hesitated. Stigler was baffled. No one in the bomber fired at him.

He looked closer at the tail gunner. He was still, his white fleece collar soaked with blood. Stigler craned his neck to examine the rest of the bomber. Its skin had been peeled away by shells, its guns knocked out. He could see men huddled inside the plane tending the wounds of other crewmen.

Then he nudged his plane alongside the bomber's wings and locked eyes with the pilot whose eyes were wide with shock and horror.

Stigler pressed his hand over the rosary he kept in his flight jacket. He eased his index finger off the trigger. He couldn't shoot. It would be murder. He also lived by a code. He could trace his family's ancestry to knights in 16th century Europe. He had once studied to be a priest.

Alone with the crippled bomber, Stigler changed his mission. He nodded at the American pilot and began flying in formation so German anti-aircraft gunners on the ground wouldn't shoot down the slow-moving bomber. Stigler escorted the bomber over the North Sea and took one last look at the American pilot. Then he saluted him, peeled his fighter away and returned to Germany. He'd wonder for years what happened.

Years later, the two men reconnected. Sharing the story to former Luftwaffe pilots, Brown hoped he might find the man who took mercy on him. They shared letters, met, and Brown organized a reunion of his surviving crew members, along with their extended families. He invited Stigler as a guest of honor.

During the reunion, a video was played showing all the faces of the people that now lived -- children, grandchildren, relatives -- because of Stigler's act of chivalry. Stigler watched the film from his seat of honor. Most all in attendance were in tears.

Stigler and Brown died within months of each other in 2008. Stigler was 92, and Brown was 87. They had started off as enemies, became friends, and then something more.

A letter was found: Stigler had written to Brown:

In 1940, I lost my only brother as a night fighter. On the 20th of December, 4 days before Christmas, I had the chance to save a B-17 from her destruction, a plane so badly damaged it was a wonder that she was still flying.

The pilot, Charlie Brown, is for me, as precious as my brother was.

Thanks Charlie,

Your Brother.

Such is the power of mercy. The message this week in our Gospel with the familiar parable is that love is a free gift from God - and in both brothers, there is so much to relate to.

We begin with the younger brother. Through sin and bad decisions, he goes off by himself to an empty place far away from home. And he faces the consequences of sin; much like the bullets that tore apart that bomber, so too does sin do this to a soul. But we are never alone. For God is with us even when we are far from Him.

Having lost it all, he hires himself to tend to pigs - an unclean animal for a Jewish person - and he's hit rock bottom. He comes to his senses and goes back to his father, planning to, at best, be treated as a servant. We are told the father "caught sight of him" while he was still "a long way off." See how the father is looking, hoping that he will return? Then, as he comes closer, the father runs to his son. The younger son barely gets a word out, and he is embraced with the love of the father.

It's such a beautiful image, and I think one of the reasons that no matter how often we hear this story, it speaks to us in a new way. The point is like the younger brother, we get lost. But when he lost it all, his eyes were opened. When we look at the younger brother, the challenge for us is to have our eyes opened too. To not wallow in shame, but to realize that sometimes we are sinners. And just like the younger son, sometimes we don't even see it. All we have to do is to say "I'm sorry," and "forgive me." But we have to realize that we need forgiveness.

The older brother has such anger. Sometimes anger can consume us; for a time, it did consume Lt. Franz. But his anger faded into the ocean of mercy. So where is anger in our life? We need to be honest with ourselves, and ask ourselves if anger consumes us towards people. Certainly we can be angry at actions. But sometimes anger turns into wrath and hate. Faith is not just a matter of the head - knowing the catechism, the parts of the Mass, etc. Faith is a matter of the heart.

God's love is so amazing. Our challenge is to open our eyes and recognize our need for it, because in our lives, there's a little of the younger brother - a gradual drift into darkness, and sometimes a bit of the older brother - a holier-than-thou attitude that looks at God as if he owes us something so long as we toe the line or an attitude of anger and resentment towards others. God though, like Lt. Franz in that fighter, is at our side always helping escort us home. Let us trust in Him and rejoice in His mercy, and help pass it on.

God Bless,

Fr. Paul