Sermon **Jeremiah 17.5-10**
February 17, 2019 **Psalm 1**
Epiphany 6C **I Corinthians 15.12-20**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 6.17-26**

A hundred and fifty years or so after Jesus' death, a brilliant, relatively young, lawyer left Rome to return to his native town. He was well-grounded in both law and rhetoric, but he returned to Carthage, North Africa as a Christian, having drained in Rome, as he writes himself (Tertullian, *Res. carn.* 59), "the cup of lust to its dregs". Back home, he embarked on a literary career in the service of the Church. Those of us who are church historians remember Tertullian primarily for contributing a whole host of ideas to western Christian thought. Many other people, whether they've heard of Tertullian or not, may have heard some of the famous statements from his *Apology.* "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" (*Apology* 50) is one such statement. But, more important for today, reporting what pagans said about Christians, he wrote; "*See*, they say, *how they love one another . . . how they are ready even to die for one another*" (*Apology* 39; http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0301.htm).

Apologies were written by many early Christian authors. These were not the kinds of apologies we might make to one another when we've done something wrong; no "I'm sorry". An "apology", in this ancient literary sense, was a "defense of the faith". We can see such "defenses" in the writings and speeches of the apostle Paul. The flowering of the genre, however, was in the first few centuries of the Church's history, when the new faith burst onto the Roman imperial scene, looking VERY different than other religions, and having — to Roman sensibilities — very exclusivistic tendencies. Indeed it was these tendencies, such as not being willing to offer a pinch of incense to the emperor-as-god, that got early Christians in trouble . . . and which demanded an "apology".

Such trouble was what prompted Tertullian to write. Persecution — meaning torture and execution — for simply claiming the "name of Christ"— was the Christians' lot. In response, Tertullian plead "for toleration of Christianity". He rebutted charges against Christian morality, and claimed that Christians were no danger to the State but, rather, useful citizens. And it was in this context that he noted that even non-Christians could see that the bond of love that Christians felt for one another was incredibly noteworthy.

That love was noteworthy, yes, but unusual in its demonstration. Earlier in the chapter in which Tertullian remarked about Christians' mutual love, he wrote,

> Though we have our treasure chest, it is not made up of [membership dues] as of a religion that has its price. . . . These gifts are, as it were, piety's deposit fund. For they are . . . to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house.

And then he writes, "But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many, [that is pagans] to put a brand [—literally a "brand", as with cattle—] upon us. *See*, they say, *how they love one another*". We must remember that there was no "social safety net" in antiquity; what Christians did was astonishing — their love was borne out in their deeds! And, so, Christianity grew, in those early centuries, by leaps and bounds. Folks could see that, once they joined this new movement, they were no longer alone. Christians supported the poor, the orphans, the elderly and others. Tertullian's point throughout the *Apology* was that Christians WERE different than your normal Roman citizen, and that was a GOOD THING!

I had a great time returning to Tertullian the last couple of days, spurred by both our readings for today, as well as by some of the reading from the Good Book Club, in particular yesterday's selection from Romans 13. The last part of Romans 13.8, from the translation known as *The Message* reads: "When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along". I sat back and asked myself, "What has the law been after all along?" And I concluded, or realized, that what God wanted from Israel was a people that would exemplify — to the world — a different way of relating to one another. AND, when they got really good at that, the rest of the world might take notice and step up to the plate!

Clearly, it hasn't been as easy as that. God's chosen couldn't get past turning the suggested ways of relating to one another into a code of conduct, a list of do's-and-don't's to which slavish obedience was demanded. And, they were no different than we, and our cultural companions — "Let's worry about our future, not about theirs!" No recognition of how our welfare, and that of others, are mutually connected. The repetition of exhortations to care for the poor, the widows, the aliens through the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament indicate two things: (1) how important such things were to God; and (2) how poorly we heed such instructions.

Yet, for a while, Tertullian's North African Christian neighbors—indeed a lot of early Christians—got the point! Another early apologist, Justin Martyr, wrote: "We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies" (*Apology 1,* 14*).* Clement of Alexandria wrote that Christians "impoverished themselves out of love, so that they are certain they may never overlook a brother or sister in need . . . They likewise considers the pain of another as their own pain" (*Stromata* 7.12).

Mutual interdependence, based on love, is what these early writers were telling their readers was at the base of Christian community. For that community to live vibrantly, we've heard the Apostle Paul use "body images" used to speak of how Christians relate: an arm, a leg, an eye, a nose — <u>all</u> are necessary. We've heard, too, about the mutual benefit of each Christian employing their spiritual gifts. Tertullian, Clement and Justin Martyr go a bit deeper to speak of, not only the necessity of a variety of gifts, but how those gifts are inter-related.

To use the imagery of our readings from Jeremiah and Psalm 1, the community of the Christian faithful becomes "land by streams of water" (Ps 1.3) where those who love the Lord can spread their roots and flourish (Jer 17.8). And then, as Jeremiah writes of the faithful "tree", "It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" 17.8). Of those who are not so well situated, or grounded — or who do not understand that critical value of interdependence, he writes: " They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land" (17.6).

"Parched places of the wilderness . . . an uninhabited salt land." That image from Jeremiah could easily describe the social world of Tertullian's North Africa. It could describe the social world that Jesus, in our reading from Luke, was criticizing, and challenging his followers to change. It describes our society today where, social scientists tell us, loneliness and isolation are on the increase, despite the "connectedness" our technology provides. In the neighborhoods around us, folks are hungry for meaningful, life-giving, relations . . . and much of what they see is division, polarization, an emphasis on self-serving action. To use Tertullian's phrase, they have "drained the cup of lust" of our society "to its dregs" only to find they're still thirsty.

This congregation has shown, over and over again, that it understands what happens when mutual benefit, or interdependence—based on Christian love—is put into play! We've seen it in the visitation, and care of, the hospitalized and home-bound. We've seen it in the welcoming, and inclusion, of newcomers. We've seen it in the response to the financial challenges we—as an entire congregation—faced. We have a story to share about mutual love, about interdependence. We can tell of well-watered land where other "trees" can be planted, to spread their roots so that they "shall not fear when heat comes, and their leaves shall stay green", where "in the year of drought they are not anxious, and they do not cease to bear fruit" (Jer 17.8).

We are that place where a twenty-first century Tertullian would write, "See . . . how they love one another!" That's a remarkable attribution; it's a compelling story we have to tell!

Amen.