

While most of us in our Christmas letters will write of the high points of our past year, as 2021 has shown us all, life can be quite hard. Not only does life sometimes beat us up, but the things we do to one another as humans are also so tragic; we can tell kids to be nice, but then we as adults bully one another, we tear one another down, we victimize people and objectify them. It can be pretty ugly. And, sadly one of the things we come to learn as human beings is hate for others, and no place is this more true than in times of war.

One of the things soldiers learn is to hate their enemy. Kill or be killed.

Of course a soldier has to protect himself, and killing is the tragic result of war. But for all the horror stories of war, there are also incredible stories of the good to emerge from the hate. And on a cold day in December of 1943, just before Christmas that year, what happened between two pilots illustrates what can happen when one sees past hate and anger, and discovers the good that lies within each human being.

Charles Brown, a young American pilot, glanced outside his cockpit and froze. Brown was a 21 year old West Virginia farm boy on his first combat mission, and it was going about as badly as you could imagine. Enemy fire had riddled his

bomber with holes and nearly destroyed it. The men on board were in even worse shape than the plane; half the crew was severely wounded, while the tail gunner was dead, his blood frozen in icicles over the machine gun. Severely damaged, the plane couldn't keep up and soon fell behind to fly alone. Somewhere over Germany, trying to make it home against all odds, Brown spotted the one thing that could only make it worse. He blinked hard and looked again, hoping it was just a mirage. But his co-pilot stared at the same horrible vision.

The two US airmen were looking at a gray German Messerschmitt fighter hovering just three feet off their wingtip. "My God this is a nightmare," gasped his co-pilot Spencer, "Pinky" Luke.

"He's going to destroy us" Brown said. It seemed hopeless.

But the men had no way of knowing that the man flying that plane, Franz Stigler, came from a vocally anti-Nazi family. On top of that, Stigler was Catholic and had spent time studying to be a priest before the war. Stigler had not wanted to join the Fighter Corps and initially signed up only to train other pilots. But after his beloved brother, August, also a pilot, died in the war, Stigler finally agreed to go to the front, anger and resentment driving him. He became a remarkable pilot. In fact,

on that day, if he got one more kill, Stigler would be given the Knight's Cross, Germany's highest award for valor. On top of this, Stigler was driven by that anger over August being killed, and at American pilots who had killed Stigler's comrades and were bombing his country's cities.

He had been 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.

Fingering the rosary he kept in his pocket, Stigler quickly came up with a new plan. Instead of killing, he would do his best to save the men on the plane. 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. "Good luck," Stigler said to himself. "You're in God's hands."

Later, he said of the incident, "To me, it was just like they were in a parachute. I saw them and I couldn't shoot them down." A German pilot who spared the enemy, though, risked death in Nazi Germany. If someone reported him, he would be executed.

Yet Stigler could also hear the voice of his commanding officer, who once told him: "You follow the rules of war for you -- not your enemy. You fight by rules to keep your humanity."

Stigler was able to recognize the common humanity of the enemy when he locked eyes with Brown. It caused him to take mercy.

As he watched the German fighter peel away that December day, 2nd Lt. Charles Brown wasn't thinking of the philosophical connection between enemies. He was thinking of survival.

He flew back to his base in England and landed with barely any fuel left. After his bomber came to a stop, he leaned back in his chair and put a hand over a pocket Bible he kept in his flight jacket. Then he sat in silence.

Brown flew more missions before the war ended. Life moved on. He got married, had two daughters, supervised foreign aid for the U.S. State Department during the Vietnam War and eventually retired to Florida.

Late in life, though, the encounter with the German pilot began to gnaw at him. He started having nightmares, but in his dream there would be no act of mercy. He would awaken just before his bomber crashed.

Brown took on a new mission. He had to find that German pilot. Who was he?

Why did he save his life?

The war left both men in turmoil. When they found each other, they found peace.

Brown scoured military archives in the U.S. and England. He attended a pilots' reunion and shared his story. He finally placed an ad in a German newsletter for former Luftwaffe pilots, retelling the story and asking if anyone knew the pilot.

On January 18, 1990, Brown received a letter. He opened it and read:

"Dear Charles, All these years I wondered what happened to the B-17, did she make it or not?"

It was Stigler. He had had left Germany after the war and moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1953. He became a prosperous businessman. Now retired, Stigler told Brown that he would be in Florida come summer and "it sure would be nice to talk about our encounter."

Brown was so excited, though, that he couldn't wait to see Stigler. They spoke over the phone, eventually meeting up in the lobby of a Florida hotel.

A writer who was there with them observed when someone asked Stigler what he thought about Brown. Stigler sighed and his square jaw tightened. He began to fight back tears before he said in heavily accented English:

"I love you, Charlie."

They met as enemies but Franz Stigler, on left, and Charles Brown, ended up as close friends.

Brown had written a letter of thanks to Stigler, but one day, he showed the extent of his gratitude. He 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. All the good that emerged from a single act of mercy. Stigler watched the film from his seat of honor.

"Everybody was crying, not just him," Warner says.

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.

Though we are not in a war currently, as we all know hate and evil are toxic things.

Sometimes it is so hard to have hope.

When I read that story, I thought of two things.

One was how life can sometimes be like being in that B-17 bomber. We get torn apart by so many bad things that can injure and crush a soul. The sins we do only to keep doing them so they become habitual. The ongoing pandemic where it can be hard sometimes to see the hope. Seeing loved ones make bad decisions that we can't seem to fix. Health problems, finance problems, trouble at school. You name it and sometimes life can be pretty dark.

The other was how we are so conditioned to hate and dehumanize. Part of that comes from original sin, but just as propaganda would cause people to hate people from other countries in time of war, there is so much of that too. Social media turns us into "keyboard warriors" where we text or tweet our anger for others. We dehumanize one another through the use of illicit images of the human body on computers. We gossip. We hold grudges. We judge.

But as we all know this is not how it is supposed to be. And that is why the Christmas story, which we all know so well, is today more relevant than ever.

For one, God is much like Lt. Franz Stigler in the sense that He comes with us to escort us to safety. This is because He loves us, without any conditions.

As we hear in the first reading tonight, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” foreshadowing the birth of Jesus; the message of hope that despite all the people have been through, God will come through because He loves them. It takes time, but the promise is fulfilled hundreds of years later in Bethlehem with the birth of the Messiah. As the infant grows up, what we’ll see is how Jesus stands with the outcasts, the sinners, the sick, the suffering time and time again. His first words after the resurrection will be “peace be with you.” He will know the pain of loss, seeing friends die and betray Him. And ultimately He will lay down His life out of love for us all, saying “forgive them, they know not what they do.” The point is that in God becoming one of us, He shows us how far He is willing to go for us. He freely chooses to be with us. He does not wave a magic wand and take away all suffering, but while He allows it, He also embraces us. Jesus is the answer to our pain. Jesus and His mercy is the answer to our battles with sin that we get ashamed about or feel like we can’t talk about, as He forgives and helps us through them. When others hurt us, Jesus will never turn His back on us. Jesus is there to give us strength through the Eucharist and through sending the Holy Spirit to us. We can’t make sense of Covid; we can’t make sense of why evil seems so prevalent; we can’t make sense of why bad things happen to good people. But we do not go forward in the dark. Rather we go forward with Jesus at our side who leads us through the battle of life home to the heavenly kingdom. So maybe

when you feel a bit like Charlie Brown on that day in December of 43, flying all alone through life, remember you are not alone. Gaze on a nativity scene; on a crucifix; at the Eucharist as it is held up and remember that our Lord is with you. We may not get all the answers we want here and now, but what we will get is a reminder that we are loved. That God does something for humanity. Sometimes a situation seems hopeless; but just as the Holy Family had no room in the inn, had to run for their lives into Egypt as Herod was trying to kill Jesus, and as Jesus did not know why He had to die but trusted in the will of the Father, ultimately God's love and mercy proved so much more powerful in the end than sin, death and darkness. May that light fill you with hope, and may you reach out and let God into your heart.

But with that, this love of God is also meant to transform us. What I love with the story of Lt. Stigler is how he had every right to be angry. But while the death of his older brother had transformed him into wanting to fight for his country and avenge his brother's death, there was something deeper within him, indeed in both men as Charlie Brown held his Bible, Stigler the rosary. And that is the power of God which caused them to see not a German or an American, but rather a human being.

I think now more than ever we need to realize how we need to do what Lt. Stigler did on that December day. And what I mean by that is we are so quick to judge, to put down, to objectify others. For instance, I have some beliefs which wouldn't be controversial and we could probably joke about, such as a steak or burger is best medium well to well, ideally with ketchup; pineapple has no place on a pizza; and that leaving a baseball game before it's conclusion unless it is a complete blowout is something you really should bring to confession. But what if I were to say I voted for Donald Trump or Joe Biden? What if I were to say I think with Covid it's important people wear a mask or that masks don't do much of anything? Or if I said I really prefer Pope Francis as a pope to Pope Benedict, or Benedict to Francis? Or if I preferred Mass in Latin or in English? Hopefully if we were having a conversation, you might agree or disagree and say your side as I would mind. But so many of us don't do that. Instead we pass on our bias; we go on social media. Some would think I was great; others awful; and many more might form an opinion about me that could spread, because that is what gossip does. We as humans can form camps and tribes and see those different from us someone to destroy, rather than to love. So maybe we can take our encounter with Christ, and our faith, and, like Franz Stigler, be transformed. Consider showing true tolerance, not just making it a bumper sticker slogan. Rediscover how to argue (one of the first classes we took before theology was logic and philosophy which teaches you

how to form them) and not shout, but to listen and then have a discussion with someone. Be firm in your beliefs, but hear the other person's perspective. There are moral absolutes, but we don't get someone to believe by screaming and shaming. Look at the people you know, and ask for God's help to let go of grudges or anger and take the steps to forgive. Refrain from fighting fire with fire and think about what you put on social media about your boss, your kid's teacher, your family, or even people with whom you disagree. Show patience on the road. Thank a police officer or a soldier or the busy clerk at a store. Think about the way you look at people on media and especially on computers, avoiding certain toxic websites that say the person is just the body and not the soul. Pray for the people who are hard to pray for. Do a random act of kindness and expect nothing in return. And what might happen? Well perhaps in some way what happened to both men later in life after that December day in 43 - the good actions multiplied over the years as generations were born, and so much more good came from that act of mercy. What we are reminded of at Christmas is how Jesus truly came for all; the shepherds, those on the outskirts are the first to hear of the birth of Jesus; the Magi arrive as visitors from the East to do Jesus homage; Jesus will call Saul, who assists in martyring Stephen who's feast day is tomorrow, to become his apostle to the Gentiles. Pride can sometimes make us think we are perfect or that we are better than others. It doesn't mean we can't get angry or riled up, for anger can be

justified. I get angry at injustice, and certain things in the world. But that needs to lead me to action, not hate. For anger can also lead to wrath and hate. It's what caused simple, ordinary people to shout "crucify Him." But what was the response? Forgive them. And from the birth, the way Jesus lived, and his Passion and resurrection, what we see is the power of love in response to hate. May we learn from that to make that a way of life.

There is no getting around the fact that life is hard, despite the many good things it brings. I think we all could agree this has not been a great year. But while there is now hope on the horizon with vaccines for Covid, even if we see more "normalcy" return in 2021, pain, heartache, and evil will always be with us. But to this, there is an answer. One we were given not just in Bethlehem all those years ago, but one we are given every time we gather for Mass or get on our knees in prayer. An answer reaffirmed by the words said by our Lord when Jesus would ascend to heaven: remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the ages. May we heed the words of the angels to Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds and be not afraid, for while evil is powerful, God has the last word. So when we are hurting and down, when we think how will I find my way out of this, or what would people think if they knew the real me, or is there hope, may we like Charlie Brown look

up and realize there is someone there at our side who will lead us through, our Redeemer who loves us more than we can ever imagine.