








- 1 **No Greater Love**
John 15:9-13
- 2 **During these weeks of Lent as we prepare our hearts for Easter, we've been looking at looking at various ways to experience more of God's presence. We've talked about**
- Confession - More grace and less guilt
 - Solitude - Less Noise/More Listening
 - Fasting - Less Consumption/More Compassion
 - Simplicity - Less Stuff/More Freedom
- 3 **For this week, I've felt led to bring a different message in preparation for Easter.**
- I came across a story that made me think about, "How can we reflect God's love in real life?" "What does it look like?" "Can we recognize it when we see it?"
 - But that leads to another question: "What is greatest expression of love, that we're called to show others?" We find that expressed in John 15:9-13 (NIV). Jesus said,
- 4 **John 15:9-13 NIV**
- ⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.**
- 5 **¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (Let us pray.)**
- 6 **So according to Jesus, there is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.**
- This is the love Jesus commands us to show.
 - So how do we lay down our life for others?
 - I found this poignantly expressed in a story I came across last week. It's a story from World War II – let me share it with you. It began when ...
- 7 **The pilot glanced outside his cockpit and froze. He blinked hard and looked again, hoping it was just a mirage. But his co-pilot stared at the same horrible vision.**
- "My God, this is a nightmare," the co-pilot said.**
- "He's going to destroy us," the pilot agreed.**
- 8 **The men 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, Charles Brown, was a 21-year-old West Virginia farm boy on his first combat mission. [SHOW PICTURE.]
 - 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.
- 9 **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.
 - And 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.
- 10 **You see, originally, it was revenge, not honor, that drove 2nd Lt. Franz Stigler to jump into his fighter that chilly December day in 1943. [SHOW PICTURE OF STIGLER.]**
- 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.
 - As well, American pilots had killed Stigler's comrades and were bombing his country's cities.
- 11 **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.
- 12 **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.
- 13 **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.
 - But he knew that, a German pilot who spared the enemy risked death in Nazi Germany. If someone reported him, he would be executed.
- 14 **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."
 - 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."
- 15 **As he watched the German fighter peel away that December day, 2nd Lt. Charles Brown was only 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.
- 16 **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.
- 17  **Brown took on a new mission. He had to find that German pilot. Who was he? And why did he save my life?**
- He 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.
- 18  **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 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."
- 19  **But Charles Brown was so excited, that he couldn't wait to see Stigler.**
- He called directory assistance for Vancouver and asked whether there was a number for a Franz Stigler. He dialed the number, and Stigler picked up.
 - "My God, it's you!" Brown shouted as tears ran down his cheeks.
 - Brown had to do more. He wrote a letter to Stigler. He said, "To say THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU on behalf of my surviving crewmembers and their families appears totally inadequate."
- 20  **The two pilots would meet again, but this time in the lobby of a Florida hotel.**
- One of Brown's friends was there to record the summer reunion.
 - Both men looked like retired businessmen: they were plump, sporting neat ties and formal shirts.
 - They talked about their encounter in a light, jovial tone.
 - The mood then changed. 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."
- 21  **Why did Stigler experience such a surge of emotions?**
- Stigler had lost his brother, his friends and his country.
 - He was virtually exiled by his countrymen after the war. There were 28,000 pilots who fought for the German air force. Only 1,200 survived.
 - "The war cost him everything," a friend said. "Charlie Brown was the only good thing that came out of World War II for Franz. It was the one thing he could be proud of."
- 22  **The meeting helped Brown as well, says his oldest daughter, Dawn Warner.**
- Brown and Stigler became pals. They would take fishing trips together. [Show picture.]
 - They would fly cross-country to each other homes and take road trips together to share their story at schools and veterans' reunions. Their wives, Jackie Brown and Hiya Stigler, became friends. [Show picture.]
 - Brown's daughter says her father would worry about Stigler's health and constantly check in on him.
- 23  **"It wasn't just for show," she says. "They really did feel for each other. They talked about once a week."**
- As his friendship with Stigler deepened, something else happened to her father, Warner

- says:
- "The nightmares went away."
- 24 **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. Stigler watched the film from his seat of honor.
- 25 **"Everybody was crying, not just him," Charlie's daughter said.**
- 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 friend discovered what that was by accident while spending a night at Brown's house.
 - He was poking through Brown's library when he came across a book on German fighter jets.
 - Stigler had given the book to Brown. Both were country boys who loved to read about planes.
- 26 **Inside the book was an inscription Stigler had written to Brown:**
- *In 1940, I lost my only brother as a night fighter. On the 20th of December, 1943, 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,*
 - *Franz*
- 27 **So back to our question, "How can we reflect God's love in real life?"**
- Jesus tells us that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for his friends.
 - In the story of Charles Brown and Franz Stigler, we find that love in the most unlikely of places.
- 28 **At risk to himself, Stigler chose to have compassion on a crippled B-17 and her crew.**
- He was clearly within his rights to shoot the plane down. They were the enemy.
 - He was a fighter ace.
 - No one would question such a decision.
 - But against all odds, Stigler chose mercy and compassion – and because of that, the lives of a B-17 crew and their future families, their children and grandchildren – were all affected.
- 29 **Few of us are faced with such momentous decisions, right?**
- We mostly live, unremarkable, everyday lives. It's as Mother Teresa has said,
 - "Few of us can do great things, but all of us can do small things with great love."
 - And the thing is, I believe, we rarely know the impact of those small everyday things we seek to do with love.
 - But through faith, God uses those small things done with his love to touch others.
 - A couple of weeks ago, I talked to my doctoral supervisor and mentor, Dr. Darrell Whiteman.
 - We talked about many things, but then I shared with him, "You probably don't remember it, but one day when one of us was sick, you and Laurie (his wife) stopped by with food."
 - That touched me deeply – I'll never forget that.
 - He'd forgotten all about it – but it had touched me deeply.

- 30 **But the story of Charles and Franz teaches us something else.**
- Of course, Franz chose to have compassion on an enemy, not a friend.
 - It's like the story Jesus told of the good Samaritan who chose to have compassion on his natural enemy, a Jew.
 - And Jesus did the same for us. Paul wrote,
- 31 **Romans 5:8,10 (NLT) ⁸ But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.... ¹⁰ For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son.**
- 32 **Even so, when we didn't have a bit of interest in God, when we were going our own way, even hostile to him, it was then that Christ died for us.**
- He treated us like friends when we were still his enemies.
 - And there is no greater love than this, "that a person lay down his life for his friends."
 - Let us pray.
- 33