APRIL 20, 2014 Norwalk

Easter Sunday

TEXT: Acts 10:34-43

***The Peace of Life -- For All***

At ten years of age, Wendell Oler was already a misfit with a reputation. His mother, for whom he had never felt much love, had died; his father had joined the marines and gone off to fight World War II, and his aunt - his mother's oldest sister - had gotten her fill of the ornery little troublemaker after only two years of substitute motherhood. Now, in John Nichols' novel THE WIZARD OF LONELINESS, it was Wendell's grandparents turn to try their hand - or to pay their dues - with this child who needed some place to go.

Not that they were thrilled with the idea either. They were getting older and tireder as it was, and the budget was already stretched pretty thin. Sure, as the town's doctor all these years, Doc Oler should have made a nice living - and could have. Folks are always getting sick or having babies or needing stitches from one accident or another. There was no lack of business. The trouble was, Doc Oler's heart was bigger than his bank account: when people couldn't pay for his services, he didn't charge for them. And that was the case more often than not. As a result, the budget was tight for the senior Olers; another body in the house to feed and clothe was not going to be an easy thing.

But the money they could find a way to handle. The big thing was the boy, and the stories they had been told...about him stealing, going off on his own without telling anybody, and wearing a mouth that could shoot fire. Raising him was going to be a challenge, and they weren't sure they were up to it - or even wanted to be.

For his part, looking out the window of the train as it pulled into the station, Wendell's enthusiasm was no higher. "Bracing his shoulders and biting his tongue, and firmly resolved not to let any old grandmothers or grandfathers push him around, Wendell began to walk fiercely toward his new jailers." (p. 11)

A misfit, with a reputation that was only confirmed by the months and the trials that followed. Disrespectful, belligerent, and with a penchant for ignoring the rules, Wendell was handily and willingly leading his grandmother to the end of her wits. "That boy is evil," she told her husband at the end of a particularly bothersome day. "There's no other way to describe him. I wish he would run away. He's going to drive me crazy. I think you should give him a good lambasting."

"What he needs," responded the doctor - quietly, carefully, resolutely, "apparently, is for us to love him." (p. 65)

Having created the world and once destroyed it, God surveyed the second attempt. It wasn't an inspiring view. Purified with flood, it was already once more corrupted and consistently shaped by anything but divine intention. Selfish, destructive, and willfully self-reliant, dominion had long since given way among the peoples of the earth, to domination, and the ties that bound creature to creator were threadbare and fraying. Made in God's image, humankind succeeded in hiding most of any resemblance.

The thought of giving this "Wendell" of a world a "good lambasting" must certainly have been attractive to God. But considering all the possible responses; thinking through the punishments, the disciplines - the various courses of action; remembering what we really could be, and that, above all, the object was to fashion a new bond, this parent of all parents - grandmother and grandfather to us all - quietly, carefully, and resolutely concludes: "what they need, apparently, is for me to love them."

And in the form of a son who touched and healed and taught and filled; in the form of a servant who washed the feet of his friends and accepted the cross of his enemies; in the form of a savior who died that we might live, "love us" is precisely what God did. And on this fresh, new Easter morning, we are here to tell about it.

As the prophet Isaiah sings it so gratefully: "Surely he has borne our grief and carried our disease; wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." (53:4,5)

Or, as John put it so succinctly, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Whoever - because any love worthy of the name, is precisely that unrestricted. "God shows no partiality," Peter announces in the text. "Anyone, in every nation, who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God." "Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Anyone…

* any Roman soldier like the one to whom Peter was speaking in the text - an outsider, an enemy, and yet, Peter realized, a child of God;
* any mischief-ridden kid who falls into trouble like most people fall out of bed;
* any struggler on the street, washed out there by the tidal wave of his own bad choices;
* any entrepreneurial wunderkind who reaches the top, only to find that something is still missing;
* any average Jane or Joe for whom the meat and potatoes of life have been nourishing, but not quite filling.
* anyone who stares into this empty tomb and, believing, follows after the one who is no longer here.

Anyone. For as Paul put it: "There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:23)

It's almost beyond our comprehension. We are all-too aware of the limits of our loving. Among the *CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO GOD*, is this one from Nan that pretty well sums it up:

Dear God: I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. (*CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO GOD*, the New Collection, 1991)

And yet despite the irreverence and disobedience; despite the disregard, God loves - without prejudice or partiality; offering forgiveness of sin, and the peace of life to all. In every nation, to anyone. Having asked for a "good lambasting," what we received, instead, was a son who gave his all. And love's redeeming work is done.

Of that, the Olers would bear witness. Though progress was seen more often by faith than by evidence, life through their love, began to change - and as grandparents, they began to see a kind of resurrection. With patience, firmness, frequent disappointment, and at sometimes great cost, Wendell - that castaway kid who had a name but not an identity; who had a place, but not a home; whose heart had hardened into a chip that he carried defiantly on his shoulder - was loved - not simply into the family - but loved, more importantly, into being. Shepherded from death, into life by a love that would not let him go, Wendell blossomed into himself.

And on this Easter morning, surrounded by blossoms that just yesterday, it seems, were buds, we realize anew the people that we, by God's grace, can yet be. The miracle of resurrection becomes suddenly clearer and more personal. It is not simply that Jesus was reborn, but that through Jesus who died and rose to life; through Jesus and the love of God he represents, my life - and yours - and all the other Wendells of the world - have been loved into bloom by a God who calls us God's own.

"Once we were no people. Now we are God's people." And life can never be quite the same again.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. Alleluia! Christ is Lord of all. Even me. Amen.