November 6, All Saints: Luke 6:20-31

by Scott D. Anderson in the October 25, 2016 issue

"Why does your president want to drop bombs on us?" shouted the elderly woman. She pressed her index finger into my chest.

It was Pentecost, 1984. We were in the Soviet city of Zagorsk (now Sergiyev Posad), standing outside Holy Trinity–St. Sergius Monastery, one of the holiest places in Russian Orthodoxy. We had just finished worship. She was angry, and she pressed me—a newly minted Presbyterian pastor from the United States—for an answer.

The previous year, President Reagan had delivered his infamous "evil empire" speech, in which he declared the USSR to be a warmongering, morally bankrupt state. The speech coincided with one of the most massive buildups of nuclear weapons in the cold war period.

The 266 of us—a microcosm of American Christianity—who had traveled to the USSR were on a different mission. Jointly sponsored by the National Council of Churches and a variety of Soviet church bodies, our two-week journey was part of a 30-year effort to build relationships and open up dialogue with America's Soviet enemy, 50 million of whose people were also our brothers and sisters in Christ. We were the largest group of American Christians ever to visit the USSR. Our Russian Orthodox hosts jokingly referred to us as "the American invasion."

When I received the invitation to be part of the USSR trip, I nervously anticipated some objections from the military personnel in the congregation I served, which was less than a mile from an air force base. But my biggest supporter turned out to be George Roberts, a retired colonel who served with the Tuskegee airmen in World War II. He challenged our 125-member church to raise the funds to pay my way. I was stunned. "I know all about war," he said. "Now, more than ever, we need to pursue a different path."

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Jesus, instructing his followers on the demands of discipleship, couldn't have highlighted a tougher admonition. It is one that is all too easy to ignore, one so often written off as weak,

naive, and unrealistic. Nietzsche summed up the prevailing cultural mood of his day, which in many ways reflects our own: love for enemies is an ethic for cowards, he said, deserving of contempt, not respect.

Colonel Roberts, a decorated military officer, saw Jesus' commandment much differently. Given the horrific consequences of armed conflict, he explained, love for enemies calls out for a different kind of courage than the kind demanded on the battlefield. Yet it is quite realistic and practical. It requires, first and foremost, the slow and tedious work of relationship building. "To love your enemy," said George, "you have to know your enemy."

This was the heart of the NCC's decades-old mission with Soviet Christians. On our trip, the full group spent time together in Moscow, Zagorsk, and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), while ten subgroups traveled on regional itineraries, visiting cities and towns from Tallinn to Tashkent. There were many difficult moments on the journey, particularly in our conversations with Communist Party officials and with American diplomat Warren Zimmerman. Both sides spoke of open hostility toward the other and the gradual deterioration of contacts at every level of diplomacy.

But these bleak moments were overshadowed by the vitality and richness of Soviet church life. Every day we visited and worshiped in local congregations—Russian, Armenian, and Georgian Orthodox churches, along with Baptist, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic ones. Every day we met with Christians in those congregations for meals in church basements and frank conversations about human rights, the nuclear arms race, and the need for peace. We saw firsthand the resiliency and faithfulness of so many Christian believers, some of whom were living in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. In the process of dialogue and relationship building, almost everything I had grown up believing about the Soviet people was completely upended.

One example was learning about the incredible suffering of the Russian people, particularly during World War II. This became a deep and emotional reality for our group. In Minsk we visited a national monument at Katyn, a farm community of 180 people that was destroyed by the Nazi invasion. By the end of the war more than 17,000 cities and towns were leveled. Twenty-five million Soviet citizens—one in four—perished, and millions more were left homeless and destitute.

The war experience left most people we met with two contradictory emotions. On the one hand, Soviet citizens exhibited a passion for peace woefully lacking in the United States. They never wanted to repeat what happened to them during the war years. On the other hand, with a united voice they proclaimed, “We will do whatever is necessary to protect ourselves.” By the end of our trip it was not difficult for us to understand both sentiments.

The NCC endured some intense criticism for this project from hawkish segments of the American press. It was a “fool’s errand”; we “were being duped and manipulated”; we were “hurting American strategic interests.” But these relationships and frank conversations with Soviet Christians led to a powerful, countercultural expression of Christian unity across an enormous ideological divide. Over time, I believe they became a practical expression of loving our enemies.

The trip was one of the most transformative experiences of my ministry. Colonel Roberts’s wisdom has become for me a pearl of spiritual truth: to love your enemy, you have to know your enemy. In a world filled with new adversaries, we reach out for relationship and try to live the reconciling love of Christ. Jesus’ admonition to love our enemies is one of the most difficult yet vitally important acts of discipleship of our time.