

To Learn Forbearance

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Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; St. Matthew 18:21-35

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost – September 11, 2011

Are there many words you only seem to use in church? How many of you use the word salvation outside this room? How about sanctified or sanctification? Or even heaven and hell? I bet the latter gets much more attention than the former. Let me know. Today, I am thinking about this word *forbear*, a word that I personally have said in worship settings many times, especially in reading scripture, but admittedly have thought little about its meaning and relevance in my life over all these decades of service in the church. I have often spoken of forbears as matriarchs and patriarchs who have come down through the ages giving us witness and heritage, but that term may be spelled forebears, which references those who have appeared before. The examination of the verb forbear or the noun forbearance has not been in my vocabulary or spiritual pallet as well it should be.

The lectionary or reading from Romans 14 is all about forbearance. Let us begin with a working definition of the verb “forbear.” World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary, two big volumes that came from my mother-in-law right after our marriage, are books I still go to even with the Internet, W.E.D. says this about “forbear;” “to hold back, keep from doing, saying or using, to be patient, controlling of self, to abstain or refrain from usage, uttering, to withhold, keep back.” Two obsolete meanings are to “endure, or to lose or shun.” With the meaning for the noun “forbearance,” we pick up still another defining nuance, “to refrain from enforcing the payment of a debt after it is due.” What we learn about “forbearing,” is that it is not a loss of a reaction, but rather a deliberate controlling of mind, temper. emotions or instinct. The sentence in the dictionary says it well, “Henry forbore to hit back because Tom was smaller in stature.” What forbearance is about is knowing all that could be brought to the moment: power, control, judgment, criticism, even righteous correction, and holding back for the sake of some other greater purpose or reason.

Now we must look at Romans 14 with the eyes of forbearance. Hear the words from this chapter from the writing of Eugene Peterson. “Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don’t see things the way you do. And don’t jump all over them every time they do or say something you don’t agree with-even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently. For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a

different background, might assume all Christians should be vegetarians and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help." (*The Message; Eugene Peterson; p. 2057*)

Peterson's translation points quickly to Paul's understanding that even though the strong may be more correct, yet they must abandon their scorn, their self-righteousness and sense of superiority. That is at the heart of forbearance, the ability to remove the know-it-all smile that many times remains on our faces when we know we have the upper hand, or the winning card. George Hunsinger, a strong Biblical New Testament scholar puts it this way, "Paul must model the idea that the judgment of grace differs from graceless judgment." What we see here clearly is that Paul knows that the followers of Jesus must dig deeper into the union with Christ, which invariably asks for a greater love for the other, particularly the weak, the ignorant, and the most vulnerable.

In this passage Paul says four things to foster forbearance, that is, holding back judgment, removing punitive behavior, and making others feel worthless. First, to counter being judgmental, Paul makes clear to the community that God alone remains the judge. Who are we to raise up our criticisms before the perfect One, the One who knows our virtues and vices in the same breath? Who is anyone to place themselves in a position that meets out justice as if they were equal with the divine? Second, Paul is quick to say to the strong ones who "tend to lord it over the weak," that Jesus by his death showed particular embracing of the weak and vulnerable. The One with all the power chooses to right the wrong with those who are on the bottom rung of the ladder, showing only his humility. Third, the ones who are strong need to step in to assist the ones who falter and not just do what is most convenient or easiest. Jesus did not make it easy for himself by avoiding the troubles of others, but took on the "troubles of the troubled." Fourth, Paul reminded them that Jesus while they were weak and still sin-ridden took on the role of servant seeking only good for them. How then should they even in their better state, resolve to ignore, belittle or condemn the weak?

To forbear means to hold back in order to strengthen the other. It is not just the matter that one is stronger than the weak, and therefore the odds are not fair. The call of the sister or brother to the weak sister or brother is to do only what strengthens the other's inner being. This is much more than correction or keeping people in their place. The Lord knows the Church has too often in its institutionalism taken exactly that role- to keep people in their place, under their control. The Church as well as the individual is called to forbearance, to a personal generosity of spirit that welcomes the weak rather than forbidding their presence. The truth is judgmental attitudes only stifle the relationships of both individuals and the church. Healthy forbearing releases an

individual as well as a church to flourish and become rich in the love of Christ.

As Romans 14, the latter part of verse four says victoriously, “The weak will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.” We are in the business of doing all we can to make others stand, and stand tall in the name and power of Jesus the Christ.

Matthew’s Gospel lesson for this day from chapter 18 has the same departure of forbearance when it comes to forgiveness. Asked by Peter how many times we should forgive, Jesus gives words that can be interpreted as either 77 times or 7 times 70. The point of this answer because 7 represents full and complete, is that we are called to forgive in the present, the now and forever. The old law may have centered around a specific number or a reasonable breaking point, but the new law of holding back wrath or judgment, power or control, is couched with a deep sense of forbearance. We are called to understand this disposition to “forbearing forgiveness” by the intense parable Jesus tells of the deeply indebted slave.

The story begins with a slave that owed 10,000 talents. That myriad of talents would be like owing a zillion dollars, because we understand from the writer Josephus in 4 B.C.E. that only 600 talents were collected in taxes from the whole of Judea, Idumea and Samaria. So Jesus is making a ridiculous point of the amount of debt because of the next part of the story. The first slave pleads for mercy from the lord, and Jesus announces that the gracious lord releases the man from what would have been the utterly impossible task of working for more than 150,000 years to pay off such a debt. Jesus is more than facetious in his wind-up for the next part of the narrative. The same slave goes out and meets a fellow slave who owes him a scant 100 denarii, what would amount to one third of a year’s wages. So, unconnected from the grace he was afforded or obdurate in nature, the first slave refuses to consider the second slave’s plea, (which as you listened were the very same words as his own), and has the man thrown in jail. Such news travels fast. The lord calls the slave in, re-charges him with the whole debt, calls him evil, and throws him into torture. And Jesus says, that’s how my *abba* Father will treat those who never forgive. (Details of the debt amounts and their meaning came from ***The Lectionary Commentary: Gospels: Marguerite Shuster, pp. 109-110***)

To forbear and think what God through Jesus Christ has done for us and hold back from our lower nature of possessive control, vengeful retaliation, and need for self-serving power is at the heart of forbearance. And even in the seemingly innocent comments that put other people down, hold them captive, and shut them off from meaningful encounters with us, we need to choose forbearance, and let all that corrupting behavior go. That is the lesson from these New Testament passages that must be mingled in our thoughts today as we reflect on September 11, 2001.

Yes, we must remember the ruthless tragedy that came to our soil and destroyed our people and many others. Yes, we must remain defensive against such attacks in any part of our country or world again. Yes, we must hold accountable those who would go

against the love of God for God's people and commit such heinous acts of evil and hate. Yes, we must lift up those who in the midst of such tragedy made sacrifices that brought saving goodness and preserved us from even more destruction and violence.

But at the same time we must seek a forbearance of spirit that seeks to disarm our enemies, dissolve hate and the desire to murder and destroy, and make a daily resolve to seek love, God's love as the final victory for our lives.

I am so glad we were given these words from Romans 14 this day to further the call to forbear.

"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." Romans 14: 7- 9

Thanks be to Christ, who is there to teach us to be forbearing in all ways.