

Love Your Neighbor
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
September 11, 2011

Romans 14:1-12

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If 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. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²²Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

²³ 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

With today being such an historic anniversary, I have given much thought to what I might say in this forum, a pulpit not of politics but of faith, yet a pulpit for a people who live in a world whose fabric is woven so tightly with threads of faith and politics and emotion and patriotism and justice and creativity and hardship and abundance. So, like any other week, I begin from the place of faith, knowing such faith is, and should be, inextricably connected to all the other facets of our lives. On this day of remembering horrible tragedies and tremendous heroism and the ethereal, almost surreal, sense of community and union which followed in the subsequent days and months, we hear words from Paul about welcoming all and words from Matthew about forgiveness, so let's begin there.

Paul emphasizes welcome of the ones not like us, the ones whose faith we might consider weak, the ones who take part in religious practices we might consider unnecessary - in short, the ones who we might look down upon for their differences. There's a reason the phrase "black sheep of the family" exists but, for the most part, our families are more like us than not. Those ones not so like us are "the other." They might literally be our neighbors; they might be other church members. They might be former friends or current friends, former bosses or current bosses. They might be Republicans or Democrats or Independents, Jews, Muslims, Catholics. They might be extremists or fundamentalist Christians. They might be thieves, cheaters, liars, prostitutes, addicts, drunk drivers, abusers, killers, terrorists. Who said Christianity is easy?

That list is pretty rough. Paul was just talking about people who don't eat meat and people who keep holy days we don't recognize, right? Back in June I reminded us all that any part of the Bible is to be read in the context of the whole. Who helped Joshua at Jericho and found favor with God? A prostitute. What did Moses have in his past? Murder. King David, writer of the psalms and man of wisdom was an adulterer who had his mistress' husband killed. Who did Jesus eat with, speak with, spend time with, welcome even? Prostitutes, tax collectors, Roman centurions, adulterers, thieves, the outcasts in so many ways. If we believe that Jesus is our model for living as God wishes and that the Bible is our guide for such living and following of Christ, Paul's encouragement of welcome is undoubtedly much broader than it might appear on the surface.

And we know from Jesus' teaching that welcoming is only the beginning. We cannot say we are living fully in our Christianity if all we do is welcome another, no matter how difficult it may have been to extend welcome to someone so different from ourselves. We must love them and love them fully, not just parts of them, parts of their character. The text from Matthew is all about forgiveness. Can you love someone fully who you cannot forgive completely? I have yet to find a way around it. When we hold onto even the littlest bit of "unforgiveness," it grows like a cancer. It colors how we view the other

person, how we treat them, maybe subconsciously, maybe consciously. And eventually, every behavior is diminished because it is tinged with that “unforgiveness.”

Forgiveness is not forgetting. There are so many hurts that cannot be forgotten, and some that should not be forgotten. But the point of forgiveness is not to pave the way for forgetting. Theologian Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn wisely says,

Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying our hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person’s actions or attitudes in our lives.¹

Are there horrible things that have happened to us because of other people? I suspect I’d see many hands if I asked who has been hurt in a life-changing way by another person. Author Marjorie Thompson says,

To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem... Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound’s power to hold us trapped is broken.²

If we withhold forgiveness, it is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to get sick. To rephrase a clarification I made a couple of weeks ago: not the Bible, nor God nor Jesus, are saying people being abused should remain in abusive relationships. People being walked all over should not continue to be walked on. Humankind was first called to be stewards of creation; you are included in that creation. Your responsibility is to take care of yourself, keep yourself safe, keep yourself away from inhumane treatment. We are not called to fix or change others - anyone who has ever tried this can tell you this only works with toddlers and oftentimes not even then! In seriousness, to forgive someone is not equal to giving them permission for bad behavior.

Love includes holding others accountable. Doesn’t God love us AND have expectations of us, expectations for good behavior, expectations that we will try to live as closely as possible to Jesus’ example as a human can? We try to share God’s approach to loving others. What is not ours to share is God’s judgment. Judgment is left for God alone. Paul makes that clear. “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? ...For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God... each of us will be accountable to God.” And, if in God’s judgment, God has welcomed the other, as we read in verse three

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 70.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 70, 72.

in Romans, then we are called to do the same. Especially in the case of someone who has wronged us, it is easy to begin to see that person as the embodiment of the wrong they have done. That is a dangerous slope to traverse. Theologian William Greenway says, “Once we stop seeing another person as a child of God and view him or her instead as the personification of a sin, it becomes easy to enjoy the energy of disdain and self-righteous opposition.”³

Whether it’s the parent who belittled us as children or the ex who hurt us or Osama bin Laden, if we choose, *and it is a choice*, to view that person as defined only by the bad we remember or know, we have lost sight of God’s view of love and we have taken on the role of judge. Rather than spend our time thinking about how others can be better people (or dwelling on how exactly we think they are bad), we do more to live towards Christ’s example if we mind our own business, if we try making *ourselves* better instead of making someone else better. No one is perfect in faith except Christ so we all have work to do. Paul talks about those weak in faith. Who here is as strong as Christ in faith?

And what does Christ do with his strong faith? He who could punish and smite, he who has destroyed the power which death had. He forgives, he makes the weak strong, he loves. He loves our neighbors, other church members, our former friends, our current friends, our former bosses, our current bosses, Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Jews, Muslims, Catholics. He loves extremists, fundamentalist Christians. He loves thieves, cheaters, liars, prostitutes, addicts, drunk drivers. He loves abusers, killers, terrorists. As Jeanette Good says, “God is God of all people, even those we struggle to accept.”⁴ To paraphrase William Greenway, beyond actions and opinions, God continually sees in every person a child of God, a soul never beyond the reach of transforming grace.⁵

God is not picky about who God loves, forgives, comforts, disciplines, guides, and genuinely cares about. We are called to do the same. We may not succeed but that does not mean we ever stop trying. Remember, “each of us will be accountable to God.” In the face of God’s tremendous mercy, exemplified in the parable this morning, do we want to say we turned around, knowing how loved and forgiven and blessed we are, and chose not to share that with another? Or do we want to say we tried our best to love fully, tried not to be half-hearted, tried to see others, especially those we struggle to accept, as fellow children of God? *It is a choice*, so which will you choose?

Let us pray: Lord, help us accept each other as you accept us. Teach us to embrace each person. Teach us to care for all people, not just some, and to love them fully. Amen.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 64.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 67.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 66.