

World Communion Sunday
October 1, 2017
Rev. Cindy Ehlke
“Forbear One Another: Really?”
Ephesians 4:1-5, Romans 14:1-4, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

The focus for today’s message is the Biblical expectation that we practice forbearance for one another. It is an extension of the command to love one another. Woven into that expectation is that we strive for unity through Christ. Practicing forbearance or tolerance is easier said than done. I came across a funny T-shirt in a catalogue that is apropos to our message. “Before you judge me, make sure you are perfect. The biblical story of the woman caught in adultery comes to mind. Technically the woman should be publically stoned to death. But when Jesus said let the one who is without sin cast the first stone. Those standing nearby slowly left, not willing to cast a stone.

Each of the three Biblical texts for today have ways of saying that we should be tolerant of one another and grateful for the complete acceptance we have through Christ. In particular listen for what unites us; this is particularly evident in the Ephesians and Romans passages. In keeping with our world communion focus, each of these verses will be read by others in their native language and then I will read them in English. (Read the three) Garrett, Rudy, Max

The dictionary defines forbearance as patient self-control, restraint and tolerance. Synonyms include tolerance, patience, resignation, endurance, fortitude, stoicism. There are three different layers of tolerance that I would suggest we take away from these passages.

The first layer is related to **interpretation of Scripture**. We should give Scripture plenty of room to speak to us and not jump too hastily to conclusions or make premature judgements about what a passage means. Just in preparing this message, I made a hasty judgement about the Romans passage.

Paul was saying welcome those who are weak in faith, I get that. We are all on shaky ground from time to time. But in the NRSV, the next verse set me off. “...some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.” My first reaction was, what? Really? You are preaching tolerance and then call those who eat only vegetables “weak?” This only confirmed my personal tendency to find Paul somewhat dogmatic and on occasion, judgmental. Boy, I was off to the races. But then I got my come uppance. I slowed down and looked at another translation. Listen to this one.

“For instance, a person who has been around for a while might be convinced that he (or she) can eat anything the table, while another, with a different background, might assume that he (or she) should only be a vegetarian 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. “

Quite a different slant, don’t you think. What is operating here is the cultural restriction on eating certain foods as had been prescribed by the Torah. Some would not wish to eat non-kosher foods. Also if meat was bought in a market it might have been used in temple sacrifice to an idol. It would take a lot of patience to understand that Jesus, the Messiah, was fulfilling the Torah and that it was no longer necessary to follow the strict food prohibitions. At the heart of Paul’s appeal is the rule of love. Jesus died for all who follow him and we should not put a stumbling block in the way of another. God calls us

to unity of life and worship across barriers of custom and ethnic identity. Needless to say, I had to change my reaction to this passage and realize that I had jumped to a conclusion that was not accurate.

The second of our levels of understanding of tolerance has to do with **our personal relationships with one another**. How we relate to family, friends and acquaintances. We are to “bear with one another in love. We are to relate to one another with humility, gentleness and patience. Easier said than done. Let me ask you a question. Can you think of a person you know, or a person in your family, that at times “rubs you the wrong way?” I suspect we all can say yes to that. The following anecdote illustrates this.

Richard gave me permission to share a story that has occurred during his time working in Eastern Washington.

Richard met Ken, a fellow fisherman. Ken is about mid 50's and he works both in the fishing boats and in the local orchards. He and Richard hit it off right away. Ken took him sight- seeing, gave him fruit from one of the orchards where he works and generally made Richard feel like his friend. Then, Richard started to have some misgivings about Ken. This was in part due to the stories he heard from other fishermen who did not have a good impression of Ken. It began to color how Richard perceived his new friend. But a few days ago, Ken opened up and told Richard the other part of his life story. He and his wife had owned and operated a restaurant in Southwest Washington. They were married for over 30 years when his wife died. It threw Ken so much. He could not bear to run the restaurant on his own. He sold it and moved. He told Richard he misses her so much. Now he works all kinds of odd jobs just to survive. This story explained a lot about Ken and his somewhat erratic behavior. It has reestablished Richard's first impression of Ken and they continue to hang out together. In Ephesians it says we are to bear with one another in love. Consider the fact that God operates through all things and in all things.

Yes, we will always make judgements about others, it is something we cannot help. But, the rule of love can as the song says “Open The Eyes of our Heart.” When we think of the term forbearance, it has a meaning that we permanently set aside those things for which we have been forgiven. Christ has offered us forgiveness and the debt has been cancelled. Can that change our perspective when we are tempted to judge another? I should hope so.

The third layer of forbearance has to do with how church reflects unity. Here I am not only meaning unity within one congregation but unity across the broad spectrum of churches. We should take care not to confuse humility and tolerance as passiveness. If we just sit back and accept those things in society that are not in keeping with the rule of love one another, we shortchange the Gospel and its power. Unity does not mean universal agreement within a congregation or between congregations. That is not realistic nor is it productive. I would like to share a quote from one commentary on this subject. “to settle for comfortable disunity because that way we can “be ourselves” and keep things the way we have always known them is to court disloyalty to the one Lord and failure in the church's mission to challenge the gospel of Caesar (the societal powers that be) with the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Very soon the session and the deacons will meet to begin a discussion about framing our focus and vision for the years going forward. We celebrate our heritage and then move on to what the current demands of society are forcing us to do: move forward and make changes where we are led to do so. Consider these thoughts from an article in a recent Horizons Bible Study: “God is still sending us out to explore and engage the sharp and broken places in our world.” A true apostle looks beyond his or her own interests and embodies a reality that transcends self-interest and culturally bound assumptions.”

In a few minutes we will celebrate communion. We are walking up to this table with countless others to share the visible sign of God's invisible grace. In keeping with World Communion Sunday, we have symbols of our outward look, the extra breads from around the world. We will both see and hear communion prayers in other languages and in signing. I would encourage us to think about this meal and our participation as an experience of grace that has the power to manifest itself in sharing, reciprocity, love and an embracing of diversity. I pray that the Lord will accompany us into a future that breaks open molds that are no longer working and repairs those cracks in society's sidewalks that are begging to be repaired.