

Proper 13, Year B

August 2, 2015

2 Samuel 11: 26 - 12: 13a

Ephesians 4:1-2 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...

In our Epistle today, St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, *with patience, bearing with one another in love...*” The King James Version reads: “With all lowliness and meekness, *with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love...*”

17th-Century English theologian Jeremy Taylor, whom we will remember on our church calendar a week from now, told the following apocryphal story about Abraham:

When Abraham sat at his tent door, according to his custom, waiting to entertain strangers, he espied an old man, stooping and leaning on his staff, weary with age and travail, coming towards him, who was a hundred years of age; Abraham received him kindly, washed his feet, provided supper, caused him to sit down; but observing that the old man ate and prayed not, nor begged a blessing on his meat, he asked him why he did not worship the God of heaven. The old man told him that he worshipped the fire only, and acknowledged no other God. At which answer Abraham grew so zealously angry, that he threw the old man out of his tent, and exposed him to all the evils of the night and an unguarded condition. When the old man was gone, God called to Abraham, and asked him where the stranger was. He replied, “I thrust him away, because he did not worship thee.” God answered him, “I have suffered him these hundred years, though he dishonored me; and wouldst thou not endure him one night?” [Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667), *The Liberty of Prophesying*]

“I have suffered him these hundred years, though he dishonored me; and wouldst thou not endure him one night?”

How often do you experience an affront from someone else, and tell yourself (or tell me, for I often hear it), “I don’t have to put up with that!”?

“I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, *with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love...*”

Longsuffering; forbearance. Not words we hear much in our everyday speech. And yet they are key words and themes in the Bible. In that passage read at weddings more often than any other, St. Paul writes: “^{1Co 13:7} Love *bears all things... endures* all things.” In his letter to the Philippians, Paul exhorts us: “Let your *forbearing spirit* be known to all.” (4:5) In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists “forbearance” (or long-suffering, patience) as one of the “fruits of the Spirit”. (5:22) Writing to Timothy, Paul says, “God was merciful to me in order that Christ Jesus might show his forbearance in dealing with me, the worst of sinners...” And to the

Thessalonians, Paul wrote: “^{1Th 5:14} admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be forbearing toward all.”

Ten times in the Old Testament it is said that God is “slow to anger.” The word “forbearance” (or forbear, or forbearing) is used 29 times in the Bible. It is an important Biblical theme!

My friends, forbearance is not a virtue which our modern world is good at. We tend to be quick to show “righteous” anger, to hold grudges, to be uncharitable and unforgiving, to see the speck in our neighbor’s eye and not the log in our own. We say, “I am in the right, and I don’t have to put up with her!” But being in the right is not the issue. **God** is *always* in the right, and yet God exhibits great forbearance toward us wayward sinners – a forbearance he wants **us** to imitate.

Listen to the following story about St. Francis of Assisi:

Now Brother Leo was the constant companion of Francis, a member of the Order of Friars Minor, the order of monks which St. Francis established. Brother Leo was Francis’ secretary. One day “Saint Francis and Brother Leo were walking from Perugia to Saint Mary of the Angels. It was winter and they were suffering from the cold. Saint Francis said, ‘Brother Leo, even if all the Friars Minor lived a life of exemplary holiness and integrity, make a note that perfect joy is not in that.’

“They walked further and he spoke again. ‘Brother Leo, even if a Friar Minor restores sight to the blind, drives out demons, grants hearing to the deaf, heals the crippled, gives speech to the dumb and raises the dead, write it down that perfect joy is not in that.’

“After walking a little further, Francis again spoke out strongly. ‘Brother Leo, if a Friar Minor understood all languages and knew everything about science and the Bible, if he had the gift of prophecy, write this down and underline it: perfect joy is not in that.’

“Continuing on their way, he added more. ‘Brother Leo, even if a Friar Minor were able to preach well enough to convert every infidel to Christ, put it on paper that perfect joy is not there.’

“After about two miles of this, Brother Leo asked him to please tell him where perfect joy could be found.

“This is what Saint Francis said: ‘If, when we get to Saint Mary of the Angels, cold and wet and hungry, and the attendant comes to answer our ringing at the gate, and he is angry and asks us who we are, and we answer that we are two brothers, and he doesn’t believe us and sends us away because he thinks we are thieves and robbers, and we have to stay out in the snow and rain without any food until dark; then, if we are able to endure such treatment patiently, without getting upset and without complaining, and if we will concede that he is probably correct in his judgment of us, then, Brother Leo, write it down that perfect joy is there!’” (Ugolino: *Actus-Fioretti*)

Perfect joy, according to St. Francis, is to be found when we are treated wrongfully and yet forbear. I say “wrongfully”; and yet Francis shows an even deeper spiritual truth: he tells

Brother Leo, “if we will concede that he is probably correct in his judgment of us” – Francis holds open the very real probability that he himself might be in the wrong, despite the fact that it would appear to any of us that Francis was clearly in the right! Here is a key to forbearance as a fruit of the Spirit: it issues from a deep sense of one’s own fallibility and sinfulness; it issues from a profound humility regarding our own complicity in whatever situation has caused the problem between ourselves and another person, even when we cannot see how we might possibly **be** complicit. Forbearance has as much to do with you as with the person who has offended you.

We only have to note the story of King David in our Old Testament lesson this morning to see this truth. When David heard the prophet Nathan tell of the rich man who took advantage of the poor man, David was filled with righteous anger. “As the LORD lives,” David says, “the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” And Nathan tells him: “**You** are the man!”

We should always be open to the possibility that we may be the one at fault, at least in part.

Thomas a Kempis, a 14th Century monk, wrote in his book *The Imitation of Christ*:

Try to be patient with the defects and blemishes in others. You also have many things about you that *they* must endure. If you can’t make *yourself* what you want to be, how can you expect to remake somebody else?

While demanding that another person be perfect, we ignore our own faults. We like to see *others* corrected, but we are reluctant to accept correction. We want the law to apply to everybody but ourselves. It is clear that we don’t measure our neighbors and ourselves by the same standard.

If everyone were perfect, there would be nothing in others for us to bear with for God’s sake. But God has seen to it that we must “carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2).

For no one is without fault, no one is without burden, no one is self-sufficient, and no one is wise enough to make it alone.

Therefore, we must support one another, comfort one another, help, teach, and caution one another.

“I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, **beg** you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, *with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love...*”

AMEN