

Mutual Forbearance

Ephesians 4:1-6, 25-32

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There is an old-fashioned, archaic sounding virtue that seems to bear particular relevance to the challenges before the church of Jesus Christ in our day. It is one we would do well to embrace in my opinion. It is one I hope our fresh class of elders will appreciate and practice.

In our lesson today from *Ephesians 4*, it began with these words: "I therefore, a 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, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This expression, "bearing with one another in love," or as the King James version of the Bible puts it, "*forbearing one another in love*," gave rise to one of the foundational principles of Presbyterian polity called "mutual forbearance."

In our recent officer's training class, our newly elected ruling elders were given a self-administered quiz that required them to examine our *Book of Order*, which is part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA. One question asked was this: "(In the church) when men and women of good character and principle differ, what do we do?" The answer to that question has been a part of our constitution in the Presbyterian Church since 1788 and states that "while all teachers should be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (F-3.0105) There it is---mutual forbearance.

Now, what does mutual forbearance look like and mean and why it is so desperately needed in today's church and world? Without question we live in a very fractured and hostile world. On every side we seen mean-spirited attacks, character assassination, and a basic lack of simple courtesy and civility. From the halls of Congress to the White House, then on down to the State House, to the town hall, to community gatherings, people are so at odds with one another that they demonize their adversaries and opponents. They not only disagree with others but become disagreeable in the process. And regrettably, this unkind and un-Christ-like

spirit can wedge its way into the church and damage the affection and friendship of sisters and brothers in Christ. The Apostle Paul, who had his own struggles with accepting opinions and people who differed with him, ran into this foul spirit in most of the churches he established and visited. The church of Corinth was a divided and divisive mess if you have ever studied the letters Paul sent there. This letter called Ephesians was in all probability a circular letter intended for churches in Ephesus and beyond in Asia Minor. Clearly, Paul is concerned with the peace, unity and purity of the churches. He emphasizes that Christ must be the center of their life and thought and that he will be the source of their unity and harmony.

I have told you previously that when reading the letters of Paul in particular and you come across the word “therefore,” you would be well advised to pause and consider what it is there for. The word “therefore” often transitions to a new thought or to the practical consequences resulting from what has been said previously. It often introduces the ethical response to the theological truths that already have been expounded. Here in Ephesians Paul has articulated the love and grace of God in the person and work of Jesus. He has spoken of God’s purpose in history, of what God has done in Christ for the salvation of his people, of the unity we have in Christ and gifts of that unity. And then he turns in chapter 4 and says “therefore,” because of what God has done for you, this is how you are to respond to God’s grace and goodness. He calls for the church to be unified, tenderhearted, forgiving and loving one to the other. In Christ, we are one, whether we are comfortable with that truth or not.

The church of Jesus Christ always has and always will face challenges and choices that threaten to distract us and disrupt us and even divide us. We may be more comfortable being among fellow Christians who think and believe and act as we do. But God calls us and places us in communities of faith and congregations where there are diverse understandings and interpretations of the will and work of God. But just as the physical body is diverse with hands and eyes and ears contributing their functions to the effective working of the entire body, so too is the spiritual body composed of diverse functions that enable the proper working of the entire body of Christ.

Conservatives and liberals, evangelicals and social activists, traditionalists and innovators, young and old — we all need one another to learn and grow and serve most effectively in the church and in the world. Apart from mutual forbearance, we will become frustrated and fractured and will damage our ability to reach and serve others in the ministry of Jesus Christ. After all, if we cannot get along among ourselves, if we judge and disparage one another, what can we offer to a fractured and fighting world? To be sure, we all as individuals have strong convictions, fervent passions, vested interests and unique experiences that we can bring with us to our life together and our service in the church. We need not set these aside as

we listen to, learn from and love one another. Hopefully the Lord will use all of these diverse realities and commitments to bring us closer to Christ and, as a result, closer to one another.

We, here at First Presbyterian like many of our sister churches have lost some valued members of our church family — some because they didn't see us as "conservative" enough and some because they didn't see us as "liberal" enough on a host of issues. There are potentially divisive issues addressed at nearly every General Assembly meeting. The same issues that we face in society are faced by the church serving within that society. Together we strive to discern the will of God for God's church and God's world. On nearly every issue there are different values, convictions and perspectives so even the consideration of a position to take creates some angst and generates ill will. Yet we have no choice but to discuss, discern and decide. As Presbyterians we do this in representative assemblies where we study scriptures, pray, consult history and the guidance of our confessions, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and follow the example of Christ. We may in retrospect make the wrong decision on occasion because "synods and councils err" again according to our constitution, but it is more likely that the Spirit will lead through the voice of his divine people gathered together than through the authority of one or a few persons.

Think of all the issues facing the people of today's world: violence, poverty, hatred, prejudice, discrimination, marriage, sexuality, warfare, capital punishment, oppression, care of the earth, responsible use of wealth, healthcare, nuclear arms, terrorism, domestic and international, immigration, religious persecution, family life, injustice, incarceration, etc., etc. Now we can break into competing camps as the world does, or in the church, we can sit down with those who may differ from us and seek together the mind and meaning of Jesus Christ for his church. We can affirm that the Spirit who unites and energizes us with Pentecostal power is greater and stronger than the spirit of the world who would tear us apart. We can model the truth voiced in *1 John 4:4* that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

None of this will happen apart from a commitment to and a practice of mutual forbearance. When you have a moment, go online and Google MUTUAL FORBEARANCE and the name J. R. Miller. You can read, albeit in rather stilted prose, a wonderful message by a 19th century Presbyterian minister that articulates how disciples of Christ can better live out this Christian grace of mutual forbearance. It is well worth reading and heeding. Among other things Miller advises to:

1. Guard against developing a critical spirit that is always looking for and even imagining slights, grievances, offenses;

2. Look beyond the action to the motive behind the offense and never presume an evil intention;
3. Practice self-control, patience and good humor; and above all else
4. Consider the example of Christ in how he related to various offenders.

A few years ago, the faculties of both Austin Theological Seminary and Columbia Theological Seminary approved unanimous statements calling for mutual forbearance among Presbyterians as we were approaching the 221st meeting of the General Assembly. Those on the far left criticized these statements saying they are not the ones to be forbearing for they are not the oppressors. Those on the far right say why should they be forbearing when it comes to dealing with what they consider sins?

Let me read you one paragraph from Austin's statement:

We suggest that "mutual forbearance" means endeavoring to hear and take seriously the convictions of others even while we hold our own (sometime differing) convictions at full strength. To exercise "mutual forbearance" does not mean being timid about that to which we are committed, but it does mean being circumspect about how we present, share, implement, and protect our commitments. We think that "bearing with one another in love" should discourage us both from pressing too quickly for changes not widely supported across the church and from opting too readily for actions that would further the schism already taking place in our fellowship. Rather, let us be drawn together to the table to which we are all invited by our Lord — to pray and converse, to listen and to argue, to reflect and to grow into what we are becoming as a historic communion in a new day.

In 2017 James Calvin Davis, a Presbyterian minister and a professor of religion at Middlebury College wrote a book entitled *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church*. He argues that the problem in many fractured churches is that people love their positions on issues major and minor more than they love the body of Christ, the church, Davis seems to root his commitment to forbearance in a love of the church. And there is something to that, I think. But I would go deeper than even a love of the church. I believe forbearance is rooted in our Lord's will for and prayer for the church found in his "high priestly prayer" as it is called in *John 17*, where Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing that his death and approaching physical separation from his disciples is imminent, prays for them and for all who would come to believe through their word – meaning you and me and all who have become a part of his body, the church. And what does Jesus ask his Father on our behalf? He asks that his followers and disciples "may be one" just as he and the father are one. And why? "So that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (*John 17:20-23*)

If our unity despite our diversity was so important to Jesus, and if that unity requires our forbearing in love with one another, then we should be no less committed to forbearance and unity than was our Lord. It is when we take our eyes off of Christ and his will and focus on ourselves and our own preferences that churches fracture and ultimately fail.

So, let us as officers, as members of this church, as disciples of Jesus Christ re-comment to “bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain its unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.