

The St. John's Pulpit

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TWO PASTORAL REFELCTIONS
THE DESTRUCTIVE GOSPEL

Romans 14:5-13

THERE GOES THE JUDGE

Gospel of Matthew 18:21-35

Third Sunday in Kingdomtide, September 17, 2017
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THE DESTRUCTIVE GOSPEL

Based upon Romans 14:1-13 (printed here)

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling 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. ⁵Some 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. ⁷We 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. ¹⁰Why 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. ¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.”

Albus was new to The Way of Jesus. During that summer, of the year 59, his friend, Marcus, had invited him to gatherings of this diverse group in Rome. Marcus told Albus the group was learning how to be obedient followers of a Jewish Rabbi named Jesus. They believed him to be the messianic revelation of God; they called him God's Son sent to reveal the love of God and the will of God. Albus was hearing new words such as salvation and righteousness in these gatherings. He heard stories about this Rabbi who was crucified as well as accounts of his coming back to life after he was dead and buried. Eye witness reports had been around for more than a generation. Some of those who told of this risen Jesus were still alive and telling their stories. Albus was impressed by the inclusive character of these Jesus followers and the influence of their sincere love and service.

At first, Albus was curious. This gathering of followers of The Way of Jesus consisted of Jews and others. Since more than 50,000 Jews lived in Rome, organized around thirteen synagogues, it came as no surprise to young Albus that some Jews were seeking to live by the practices of a Jewish Rabbi. What did surprise Albus, as he learned more about the group, was their extreme diversity; several nationalities and cultures joined with these Jews to form this faith community. Although first century Rome was the largest city in the world with a diverse population approaching one-million, it was still strange to see so many variations of tradition gathered as one.

At the third gathering which Albus attended, the leader of the faith community read a passage from a letter written to them by a man named Paul. They called him an apostle and a missionary teacher. In the passage, Paul challenged them to seek unity rather than uniformity. Paul noted how some people were focusing more on their differences rather than what they had in common. Albus knew some people were committed to worship on Saturday while others were compelled to worship on Sunday. He also knew some were meat eaters and some were vegetarians. Paul challenged them to stop judging one another as if one practice was superior; for what begins as judgement grows into resentment eventually bearing the fruit of despising one another. In the letter, Paul reminded the followers of Jesus' Way that they were accountable to God – not to one another.

Albus was reminded of a story Marcus had told him. It was a story about one of Jesus' teachings passed down through the years. Jesus told his disciples, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Then Jesus told a story about seeing specks in another person's eye but being blind to the logs in your own eye. It conjured up a humorous picture of a person contorting their posture to look around a huge log to see a tiny speck. Albus realized that if he focused on what he determined to be wrong in another person, he could not focus on what God saw as wrong within Albus.

That was the day Albus started understanding this Gospel, this Good News of God's Love truly was saving his life; spiritually transforming him. He had been so focused on figuring out 'what the Gospel is' that he had failed to see 'what the Gospel does.' Although he understood this Gospel of Jesus was building him up in hope, joy, love, generosity, tolerance and kindness – constructive, so to speak; the Gospel was also destructive. The Gospel was destroying some logs in his life; tearing down prejudice, cultural blindness, social bias, selfishness, greed, grudges, impatience, apathy toward the will of God, etc. On that day, he became one in what has become a long line of Jesus' followers. Albus committed himself to God and asked God to use the Gospel of Jesus' to destroy everything in his life that could be a stumbling block or a hindrance to the message of Jesus flowing through him. Albus became an influence for the wideness of God's mercy in the life of the world.

THERE GOES THE JUDGE

Gospel of Matthew 18:21-33

"Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"²² Jesus 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.²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;²⁵ and, 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.²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.²⁸ But 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.'²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'"

In 1957, an African American student applied to Duke Divinity School. Their letter of rejection explained they did not accept "Negro students." Twenty years later, that rejected student, who became Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York City, Dr. James Forbes, was invited to speak on Founder's Day in the Duke University Chapel. He told them the story from 1957 and entitled his message, "Let's Forgive Our Fathers."

Every human being experiences scratches due to indignity or embarrassment that must be put aside and left behind. Some hurts are due to mistakes, impulses, good intentions, misjudgments or accidents. Yet, there are some hurts you sustain which are intentional, unfair and deep. When someone is disloyal to you or betrays you or maligns you or abandons you hoping to leave a scar, you are not merely offended; you can be broken and open wounds can result. The only way to guard yourself against ever being hurt by others is to build thick walls around yourself that prevent you from enjoying honest friendships or offering yourself to others through vulnerable trust. That lifestyle, of course, creates loneliness carrying its own virus that eats away the core of your soul.

Some people seem to find forgiveness to be easier than do others. For most of you, though, forgiveness is some of the most difficult work you must do – so you procrastinate the hard labor of forgiving as often as possible. Forgiveness is slow, arduous, cyclical, confusing, heart-wrenching and painstakingly cathartic. You know that forgiveness is not merely accepting a person for who they are, or excusing or apologizing for their own weakness or slack. To do that simply solidifies your position of victim and escalates the hostility you feel toward them; also devouring your soul. Quite often, people cling to a grudge so they can continue to accuse another person or a system and excuse their own sin; logs and specks and specks and logs.

One way to journey toward forgiving someone or some system that sins against you is to refuse to protect your pain or honor your hurt. Forgiveness buds into reality when you no longer wish harm upon the person who hurt you; and forgiveness matures when you can begin to wish them well. Of course, some people are more difficult to forgive because they do not seem to care if they hurt you. They equate an apology or repentance with groveling and are almost incapable of humility. They have the answers to the wrong questions. However, at some point, forgiveness must happen for your own healing to begin.

Forgiveness is one way you are compassionate and redemptive in a sinful and unfair world. Forgiveness is an expression of your discipleship unto Jesus who reveals God as One who chooses to forgive rather than to avenge. As Lewis Smedes writes, *“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”*

As most of you are learning, forgiveness requires more from you than merely deciding you are going to let go of a grudge. Forgiveness requires you to follow your commitment to be spiritually transformed and shaped by the character of God as revealed in the lifestyle and teachings of Jesus. Forgiveness requires you to be a lifelong learning disciple of Jesus; to learn of HIM and to practice his way. Forgiveness requires you to allow The Destructive Gospel to chip away at the granite of your grudge which has hardened due to your focus on your pain.

Jesus’ parable of the forgiven unforgiving servant allows The Destructive Gospel to work on us twenty centuries later. The debt of this servant was forgiven. The Lord of mercy heard his cry. Yet, that servant refused to hear the cry of a fellow servant. Each Sunday we pray, *“...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...”* In the day of Jesus, many who heard him teach were slaves through the deceptive system of debt bondage; sharecroppers on their family’s land whose income went to absentee landlords. Jesus used the term ‘debt’ for it was the Aramaic term commonly used to denote ‘sin.’ Each Sunday, we say to God, *“Our Father – Relational Loving Lord of our faith...forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us.”* We do not desire to be forgiven yet unforgiving.

Each of you has both enlightened visions and blind spots. You have both helped people and hurt people. You have been forgiven and you have needed to be forgiven.

You come to God just as you are; God receives you, welcomes you, pardons you, cleanses you and redeems you.

God’s love has broken every barrier down; so, let us refuse to go about building new ones.

As members of Christ’s Church, your Ministry in Daily Life takes place in a world where people are burdened down by guilt and shame. Beloved, this week, you may cross the path of someone who is afraid of God. They may have been formed by church malpractice and theology teaching fear with messages like, ‘Here comes the Judge.’ You may be the person of light who reveals to them the Lord you know; the righteous and merciful Judge, who has heard your cry and seen that your life is being spiritually transformed by The Destructive Gospel. Maybe you can offer to someone a gift by saying, “The Lord forgives you. The Lord does not want to condemn or punish you; the Lord wants to lead you in active faithfulness. Look, there goes the Judge; let’s follow together.”