

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Robert Alexander**  
**“Standing Before God”**  
**Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35**  
**15th Sunday After Pentecost**  
**September 17, 2017**

Every group or family probably has to deal with accepting differences. Let me tell you about two members of my family who have learned to get along.

He is white – she is brown in color.

He is large – even obese - while she is petite.

He is slow and lethargic – and she is alert and quick.

He likes to lay around and sleep all day – she likes to run and jump and play.

He is our cat Spot – and she is our dog Pixie.

They couldn't be much more different from one another but they are both a part of our family and I love them and so we make it work for life to happen with both of them in it. They don't spend much time together but just this past week – they were lying right next to one another while I was bent over them scratching them on the back and the belly and behind the ears. And I had this thought:

Maybe that is what we need sometimes when people just can't seem to get along! We could all sit down for a good back-scratching or whatever else we could agree on that we might enjoy together. Certainly the blessings that God provides are more abundant than the petty differences that seem to divide us. It would certainly be better than fighting and arguing and pointing fingers or paws or claws!

I wonder if there was a little bit of that fighting going on in the church in Rome or in Matthew's community. In our passages this morning – both in Paul's letter to the church in Rome and in the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew – we find concern over the health of the community of faith. The passages raise many questions. Despite our many differences, do we treat one another with respect? Do we allow one another to live by their own conscience – trusting that each one is seeking to honor God with their life? Do we put pressure on others to do things that they are uncomfortable doing? Do we offer forgiveness in the same way that we have received it from God? Do we remember who we are as God's forgiven and loved children as we stand before God and do we remember that each of us is part of a family of faith? Are we willing to set aside our own needs and wants to preserve the unity and peace of the family of faith?

In the first reading from Romans, Paul wrote to the church about how they were to refrain from judging each other over differences of opinion about certain things. The church was serious about being a people set apart and according to one commentary “Next to the practice of circumcision, nothing marked out the Jewish diaspora community so clearly as their observance of the dietary rules and special days laid down in the Torah.”<sup>i</sup> And while some in the community felt it necessary to adhere to these rules in every detail, there were many who had found a new freedom to live by the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. In other words – their desire was still to honor God, and they had found new freedoms in living that did not bother their conscience. Paul wanted the community members to respect one another and to trust one another to follow the path they believed God had marked out for them rather than judge one another and call into question one another's motives.

In the Kingdom parable found in Matthew, Jesus taught about the quality of unlimited forgiveness. When Peter asked how many times he should forgive someone in the community who had wronged him

Jesus responded – not seven times but rather seventy-seven or seventy times seven times. The number, is irrelevant. Most scholars agree that Jesus intended for Peter to understand that the Kingdom quality Jesus was teaching is unlimited forgiveness. There should be no limit to our ability to forgive others. The King in the parable forgave the man an absurd amount of money. The amount listed – 10,000 talents - is the equivalent to a debt of about 150,000 years of a day laborers wages! Something the man never could have repaid! After he was forgiven his large debt by the king he was unwilling to forgive a fellow servant what was the equivalent of only a couple of weeks of pay.

N.T. Wright in writing about this passage, says that forgiveness is like breathing. We can only hold so much air in our lungs, right? Take a deep breath and hold it there. That is God’s forgiveness. That is God’s mercy for you that gives you life just as that breath gives life to your physical body. If you hold onto it, you will not be able to take another breath because your lungs have only so much capacity for air. Breathing out represents our offering forgiveness to others. It represents our commitment to living in community with others and to being open to them regardless of how different from us they may seem or what they may have done to offend us or harm us. Of course if there is willful harm caused there may be some consequence for that action, but often times we are hurt by someone’s actions who never intended to hurt us. Sometimes we are hurt because of a misunderstanding or because of a difference of opinion or because we are more attached to being right about something than with the health of the relationship and the community.<sup>ii</sup>

Breathing reminds us that the air (the forgiveness) that we are graciously given by God is meant to be shared with others. As we breathe out (and you can let that air out if you haven’t already) we remember our own commitment to share the forgiveness of God with others.

Katherine Blanchard writes that “The church is meant to be a uniquely forgiving people, a people of humility and repentance, who concern themselves with the specks in their own eyes rather than the planks in their neighbors’.”<sup>iii</sup>

Forgiveness is letting go of someone and letting go of the notion that someone owes you. There is no debt to be paid. In your mind and in your heart they are free. That does not mean that they are free to hurt you or walk all over you – but you choose to let go of the reigns that you have used to try and control the relationship.

There is a legend about Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the last supper. He is said to have painted the likeness of an enemy when he painted the face of Judas. Later, when he tried to paint the face of Christ, he could not succeed. Troubled in spirit, he blotted out the face of Judas and forgave his enemy. Then the spirit of da Vinci was set free to paint the portrait of Christ. Only when we forgive another shall we discover that the blindness of our hearts is removed and we are enabled to see God.<sup>iv</sup>

With forgiveness in our hearts we learn to leave the judging to God. Paul, in verse 10, writes that we will all stand before God’s judgement seat. It is there that we will be held accountable to God. Ultimately, as Paul reminds the church elsewhere, that it is through the righteousness of Christ that we are saved and set free. Our judgement then, ends in our redemption and our forgiveness. How then, after having realized the enormity of this gift, can we judge one another and withhold forgiveness from one another?

Paul maintained that all should be fully convinced in their own minds that their course of life was honoring to God. One commentary states that Christians will disagree with one another on important issues, and yet each can be convinced of the rightness of his or her position. They can disagree, and both

be right (that is, accepted by God). The convictions of one should not be used as a stick to beat the other or as a yardstick by which to judge the other.<sup>v</sup>

Desmund Tutu, in his book No Future Without Forgiveness, wrote that “Times are out of joint. Alienation and disharmony, conflict and turmoil, enmity and hatred characterize so much of life. Ours has been the bloodiest century known to human history....Somewhere deep inside us we seem to know that we are destined for something better. Now and again we catch a glimpse of the better thing for which we are meant – for example, when we work together to counter the effects of natural disasters and the world is galvanized by a spirit of compassion and an amazing outpouring of generosity; when for a little while we are bound together by bonds of a caring humanity...when we sign charters on the rights of children and women; when we seek to ban the use of land mines; when we agree as one to outlaw torture and racism. Then we experience fleetingly that we are made for togetherness, for friendship, for community, for family, that we are created to live in a delicate network of interdependence.”<sup>vi</sup>

We are all children of God and each of us a recipient of God’s grace. We must let go of our own fear to pull down our judging finger and let go of our desire to be right. We must demonstrate the same love and grace that our Lord Jesus demonstrated.

Here is a recent example that I think relates. One of my colleagues has placed at the bottom of his email signature – underneath his name and title and contact information the following statement – Pronouns: he, him, his. This caught me off guard and also got my attention. I realized again, as I often do, that the world is changing and there is more happening than I can keep up with and there are more ways of looking at life than I can fathom. As you may know, there have been many conversations in recent years about sexual orientation and gender identity. I don’t pretend to know very much about this although I have friends and family who are gay and acquaintances who are transgender.

All of my life I have read in the Bible, “God created humankind in God’s image, male and female he created them.” But I also know that in the world today there are many people who are no longer comfortable with such labels. I also know that the scriptures teach that there is no longer male or female but that all are one in Christ Jesus.

To judge someone simply because they do not use the same language that I do as it relates to gender is not honoring the way of Jesus. To push someone away simply because I do not understand their position or their point of view or their experience is only a way to display my own fear.

My colleague has found a way to show respect to those who may have a different view or experience. Rather than judge in fear, he has opened his heart and his life to conversation and relationship and understanding. This is consistent with the gospel message - for Jesus taught us not to fear. “I am with you,” Jesus said. So I believe that Jesus **is** with us as we figure out how to understand one another when we are from different races and different sexual orientations, and different genders, and different political persuasions, and different socio-economic groups, and different education levels. Jesus is with us in the journey. And when we are all journeying towards the same goal – to honor God with our lives – we trust the Spirit to help us work out the details along the way.

Yesterday morning I was standing at the starting line over here on South Street waiting for a race to begin. Around me there were pale people, tan people, black people, brown people, women, men, tall short, round, skinny, young, old, gay, straight, and probably other orientations that I had no idea about. All of us were there to *Run for the Green*. Yes – there were some that were there to win the race, but for the most part, people were there to have a good time and to make it to the finish line. They were there to support the Davidson Land’s Conservancy and to enjoy a beautiful Saturday morning.

No one – as far as I could tell – got hung up on labels. “Oh, I’m not running with them...because of their color or ethnicity or political persuasion or socio-economic status or physical ability.” Rather – there was a lot of cheering and clapping and encouragement as people did the best they could to get to the finish line.

I think the church could be a lot more like that and we could help the world to be more like that in the places where there is fighting and judgement and where forgiveness is needed – whether it is in international diplomacy, local politics, or family affairs. I think, as the Body of Christ, we could stand to be a little more focused on encouraging each other in the race we are running rather than arguing over whether someone has a running shoe that we like or not - or whether they fueled up before the race the way we thought they should - or whether their training regimen before the run was what we thought it should be. Before we find ourselves going there...we need to step back and take a deep breath and remember who we are - standing before God – forgiven children that are all trying to get to the finish line of this race that we are in. And as we are standing there – perhaps we can feel the presence of that familiar friend Jesus Christ who has gone there before us and who walks beside us and helps us in our struggle as we figure out how to stay in community. Friends – we are in it together and God wants us all to finish! May it be so!

**To God be the Glory! Amen.**

---

<sup>i</sup> Dunn in World Biblical Commentary – 38B – Romans 9-16 ( ) p. 810

<sup>ii</sup> N.T. Wright in Matthew for Everyone: Part Two (WJK, 2002) p. 40

<sup>iii</sup> Katheryn D. Blanchard in Feasting on the Word: Year A. Volume 4 (WJK. 2011) p. 72

<sup>iv</sup> John T. Carroll and James R. Carroll in Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus (Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) p. 94

<sup>v</sup> Dunn in World Biblical Commentary – 38B – Romans 9-16 ( ) p. 814

<sup>vi</sup> Desmond Tutu in No Future Without Forgiveness (Doubleday, 1999) p. 264-265