

Bear With One Another

A sermon by Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on New Year's Day, the first Sunday after Christmas, January 1, 1995. Scripture Lesson: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A little over eleven hours ago we entered into a new year. Here's a New Year's resolution ^{idea} from God's Word. Through Saint Paul, the Lord says to us, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other (ανεχομενοι αλληλων) and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." This Word is especially relevant today, the first day of a new year. "Bear with each other" the Lord says.

This is not merely good advice like we read about in the Dear Abby column. It's the Word of One who has come to us in the birth, death and resurrection of

Jesus. It's from this One that we see what it means to bear with each other.

Jesus is our model for forbearance.

Think how he was forbearing with his disciples - 3 years ... don't understand.

In Christ, God bears with us. I'm not referring, primarily, to all the terrible things that we do. I'm sure that we have all done some terrible things over the past year - that's that deeply hurt and scarred ourselves and others. God is ^{as well as that} forbearing of those things as well. But I'm talking, not so much about the terrible things we do from time to time, but the little irritating things that we do that God simply forbears - things like our bad moods, our pettiness, our self centeredness, the grudges that we continue to hold and hold over others. But also our irritating habits - our lack of punctuality, our inattentiveness to God and to others and so

many other things. These are all things that God, in Christ, bears with on a daily basis in God's relationship to us. Throughout our lives God has chosen to bear with us.

God, in Christ, bears with us like a good parent who recognizes that our immature children will someday ^{become} mature adults. Even Mary and Joseph had to bear with Jesus as a little boy. Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. Mary and Joseph were forbearing with him as he grew and matured. And God bears with us because God knows that we're still growing up - we're still growing in wisdom. We're not as wise as we will be one day. Some things about us God doesn't so much need to forgive but to bear with until we become more mature.

But what does it mean to bear with one another? Bearing with one another is not the same thing as being polite to one another. It's certainly better to be polite than to be rude, but politeness can mask a condescending attitude. It's possible to be polite and not forbearing.

Nor is tolerance the same thing as bearing with one another. No virtue is more highly valued in our culture today than tolerance, but tolerance can smack of relativism. Relativism - where there is no right and wrong, no better or worse way of doing something or saying something. Relativism doesn't really allow for improvement because relativism doesn't acknowledge any standard by which improvement can be measured. Tolerance is a great virtue but it can also smack of indifference as well as relativism. Indifference - you simply don't care enough of

by anybody to want to see them grow in wisdom and favor with you or anybody. We can be tolerant and yet not have forbearance.

Forbearance, St. Paul tells us, is closely related to compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Take gentleness for example. The King James Version translates gentleness as meekness. It's impossible to bear with one another without gentleness or meekness. A gentle person doesn't try to impose his or her imperious will on a spouse or a friend. Gentle people are not tyrannical, domineering, judgmental or bossy. A gentle person doesn't try to make their spouse or friend just like themselves. Gentleness, or meekness, is closely related to forbearance. Forbearance recognizes that we aren't all the same - we have different interests, different personalities.

Lowliness or humility is another word St. Paul associates with forbearance. Probably nothing, in our day and age, is less appealing than lowliness. No behavioral characteristic is more to be emulated than self assertiveness; asserting our will, not letting anybody walk over us, getting our way. And yet St. Paul, exhorts us to lowliness so that we can be forbearing. Humility is not putting yourself down. I read one of the best illustrations of what humility means in a biography of Disraeli, the great Victorian British statesman. A young woman attended a state dinner in Victorian England and was seated in between Gladstone and Disraeli. She was asked afterward what it was like to be with two of the most powerful and influential men in the whole world. She said, "When Mr. Gladstone talked with me I had the feeling that I was listening to one of the most

brilliant and powerful men who have ever lived. When Mr. Disraeli talked with me I had the feeling that he consider me one of the wisest and most interesting people that he had ever met." True humility doesn't put oneself down. True humility communicates to our spouse or friend just how important they are to us. We bear with one when we are truly humble.

Patience is still another word closely related to forbearance. It takes patience to do anything really well. It takes hours of painful, repetitious, practice to do anything well whether it's athletics or marriage or parenting. It takes patience and practice and persistence. Patience enables us to bear with ourselves when we make mistakes. And patience enables us to bear with our spouse as he or she grows and mature. It may take me a long time to remember to turn my socks inside out before putting them in the dirty clothes. It may take years before Kay really enjoys watching football for twelve hours straight on New Year's Day. We need patience, lots of patience. We need to bear with one another with respect to these and many other things. Patience is closely related to forbearance.

So forbearance requires meekness, patience, and lowliness as well as compassion and kindness.

In Thornton Wilder's play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Maggie says to her husband George, to whom she had been married about 5000 years, "I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise.... That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it

was the promise that made the marriage.”

All of us are imperfect people – imperfect friends, imperfect spouses, imperfect parents, imperfect children, imperfect Christians. We’re imperfect. Imperfect people who have made promises to one another and to Christ. Imperfect people can keep promises only if we bear with one another. As imperfect people who have entered a new year and who may have made New Year’s resolutions hear again God’s Word to us, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other (*ανεχομενοι αλληλων*) and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord God, holy Father: ~~Oversee every family represented here this morning. Fed by your Word and Sacrament and held by your Spirit, may we put on compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as you, Lord, have forgiven us. This we ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.~~