

Bear with One Another
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
October 17, 2021 – AM Service
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Ephesians 4:1-6

“Be completely humble and gentle, bearing with one another in love.” Today’s ‘one another’ is the virtue of forbearance. That virtue appears here in Ephesians, but also in Paul’s letter to the Colossians which Bob read earlier. Paul tells the Colossian church to bear with each other there too. In both of these passages Paul uses the Greek verb *Anekomai*. *Anekomai* is the verbal form of the noun *aneko* which means forbearance. In both these passages Paul is saying to us, as you learn Christian community, as you learn how to live with one another as Christian brothers and sisters, forbearance is really important. I would add, not only is forbearance important in general, but I think it is especially important for our times. All of these one another virtues are important tools for building and maintaining community, but forbearance is a tool that is especially needed for today’s challenges. I hope it will be clear why that’s so as the sermon goes on.

First some clarity: What exactly is forbearance? It’s kind of an old word, we don’t use it much in conversation, do we have a general sense of what it means? We talked about that a little bit during one of our lunches at church. One person wondered, “Forbearance...is that like if I were on a hike with Bob and I said to him, ‘Bob, let me take some of the stuff from your pack and I will carry it for you.’ Is forbearance like bearing Bob’s burden?” We talked about that and we said no, that’s not what forbearance is. Forbearance isn’t carrying another person’s burden, it’s carrying the burden of that person – their sharp edges, their annoying habits. So forbearance is not me going on a walk and offering to carry some of what’s in Bob’s backpack. Forbearance is me going on a walk with Bob and having to put up with all his talk about the greatness of the Minnesota Golden Gophers. Forbearance isn’t me carrying some of Bob’s burden; it’s me carrying the burden of Bob. Forbearance isn’t Bob carrying some of my burden; it’s Bob carrying the burden of me. So, forbearance is a kind of holy restraint. We practice forbearance when we absorb the hard edges, the bad habits, of another person and we do it for the sake of community.

Forbearance is what I will call a cartilage virtue. What do I mean when I call it a cartilage virtue? Cartilage is a rubbery tissue found in various places throughout your body, one of those places is your knee. The cartilage in your knee helps the joint absorb shock and it reduces friction between the bones. It’s because of your cartilage that your bones can absorb the pressure of running. When you run, your knee takes the impact of four times your weight. So if you’re 150 pounds, your knee takes 600 pounds of pressure. The cartilage absorbs that pressure, the cartilage absorbs the impact, so that instead of collapsing in pain, you can run! You can do this amazing, productive thing! If you tried to run without cartilage, your bones would smash into each other and

there would be excruciating pain. The two bones would grind and possibly splinter.

In verse 4 of our passage, Paul compares the church to the human body – one of his favorite images for the church, as you all know. “There is one body,” he says in verse 4. Later he builds on that image. We all have different gifts so that the body of Christ can be built up. And when the church is working as it should, when it is led by the Spirit, the whole body is joined and held together by every supporting ligament as it grows and builds itself up. So the body of Christ has many members and many parts, but in order for those parts to work together productively, the Holy Spirit has placed cartilage virtues in us, and Paul calls us to these virtues. He names them specifically in verse 2. Humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance. All these virtues absorb the shocks and reduce the friction that occurs in relationships. Without these cartilage virtues, the body couldn’t function; there would be too much friction, too much conflict, too much pain. We would fracture. With these cartilage virtues, the friction is reduced, the pressure is absorbed and we can not only live with each other, we can work together to do wonderful things.

Humility. Let’s say you and your friend disagree about politics. If you both approach your difference with nothing but hard certainty, if you are both utterly convinced to the rightness of your cause and anyone who thinks different from you is either uninformed or intellectually challenged, then your intellectual differences will become a car crash. But things would be different if both of you had a little humility, if you can honestly say to yourself, “Well I don’t know everything, I could be wrong, I know I have my blind spots. I’m willing to listen.” Now there’s a little cartilage in the joint. You can talk about something and not kill each other. You can differ and still function productively as friends.

Patience. One partner in a relationship always wants to be early, if she’s not there 10 minutes before the meeting starts, she gets antsy. The other is chronically late, always trying to get one more thing done before he heads out the door. If both parties are totally inflexible about schedule, if they both insist on their timetable, every outing, every event will bring friction. But if there’s a little patience working, they can live with each other’s differences and still love each other. It doesn’t mean they don’t get irritated, but the cartilage of the patience absorbs the irritation.

Gentleness. A parent wants to make sure that her child doesn’t do anything self-destructive. That she stays out of trouble, but she’s so determined to keep her daughter on the straight and narrow that she becomes controlling. Every aspect of the child’s life is aggressively supervised and managed. The child rebels. The relationship shatters. A little more parental gentleness might have yielded a different result. When we are gentle, we still push. We still offer our opinions and express our concerns, but we are not as forceful and firm and controlling. We leave a little room for the other person’s independence and her feelings. It’s like cartilage in the relationship.

Forbearance. Forbearance is all three of these things mixed together. Forbearance is a little patience and a little gentleness and a little humility all put together. Forbearance is an overall habit of mind. It’s a habit of mind where we say to other people, I love you and I’m ready to be in communion with you, and

I say that knowing that we are different and there will be friction.” “I know that you will rub me the wrong way, but I stand ready to absorb all that for the sake of love. I stand ready to absorb all that for the sake of the Kingdom.” Forbearance does this in all sorts of ways.

Forbearance tells more than one story. When my neighbor does something that annoys me, instead of imagining that came from the worst possible intentions, I work to imagine other, less sinister intentions. Forbearance writes the angry email, but then waits a day before hitting send, just to see if things change, just to let things settle. Forbearance takes the phone calls of your depressed friend even though you know they will be exhausting. Forbearance doesn't judge a person by that one thing they posted on line when they were 16. Forbearance listens intently to your grandpa's story about that thing that happened to him when he was a teenager, instead of telling him this is the fifth time you've heard him tell it.

Forbearance doesn't roll its eyes. You don't play the martyr when you bear with another person. It shouldn't be obvious to the other person that you're putting up with them. “Bear with one another *in love*,” says Paul. In love. You don't do this with gritted teeth, you do it with love.

Forbearance isn't avoidance. Forbearance doesn't ignore sin and injustice and hurt. It's strategic. Its ultimate aim is to bring healing to relationships and to people. But instead of trying to solve a problem immediately, forcefully – it opens up space in which other more gracious kinds of power can work – kindness, mercy, encouragement, grace.

We need cartilage virtues right now. We need them in the church, in our marriages, in our friendships, in society. As I see things, cartilage virtues are in short supply. Those virtues are not being formed in us. We are being formed by outrage and distrust and angry certainty. It goes by different names. Cancel Culture. Call out culture. Zero tolerance. Whatever you call it, when cartilage virtues are lost, every difference of opinion leads to a fight and a fracture.

An example. Not so long ago there was a big push in schools to enact zero tolerance policies. We can't put up with violence in our schools, we can't put up with misbehavior in our schools, we need zero tolerance policies. If a kid brings a weapon to school, that kid is expelled, no ifs ands or buts. It sounds great. It sounds principled. But then you get cases like Zack. Zack was a teenager who had a big role in raising his first grade brother. His father was a violent and abusive drunk who came home one night waving a handgun and threatening to kill his kids. When Dad passed out Zack took the gun and put it in his backpack. The next day he brought the gun to school so he could give it to his principal and get it out of the house. Under zero tolerance, Zack was expelled. Zero Tolerance policies have noble goals. End violence! Keep our kids safe! But they don't have enough flexibility. There's no cartilage. Human relationships need cartilage.

I did youth group ministry for a long time, and after doing it for a number of years I realized that young people would sometimes test you to see if you were a forbearing person. They would test you to see if you had cartilage virtues. You would be teaching a church school class or you would be leading a

small group discussion and a young person would say or do something outrageous, just to see how you would react. They were testing to see - will this guy blow up? Will this guy write me off? Or is he the kind of person who can live with imperfection? Can he live with my imperfection? Will he bear with me? If I tell him my fears and doubts and imperfections, will he be safe?

All relationships need this cartilage virtue. Without forbearance, marriages will shatter. Without forbearance, friendships will not hold. Without forbearance, parents and children will be at each other's throats. Without forbearance, business partnerships blow up. Without forbearance, churches split. Without forbearance, we would have no hope.

I mean that in the deepest sense. Forbearance saves us. I said earlier that when Paul calls us to bear with one another he uses the verb *anekomai*, and that the noun forbearance is *aneko*. The noun form of forbearance appears only two times in the New Testament, and both times it's not about our forbearance with each other, both times it's about God's forbearance with us.

One of those places is Romans 3:25, a passage that Bob read earlier. "In his forbearance God left our former sins unpunished." When we sinned, God did not execute a zero tolerance policy. God did not cancel us as soon as he saw our sin. Instead, he held off judgment, put up with our rebellion, and then he sent Jesus to us. And what does Jesus do? He forbears too. He puts up with bickering disciples, and resentful religious leaders, he comes to his own and his own do not receive him, but he doesn't call down judgment upon the masses, he dies for them. He absorbs the weight, the shock, the trauma of our sin. Without God's forbearance, without Jesus' forbearance, the weight of our sin and our guilt and our fear and our anger would shatter us, crush us, but on the cross Jesus absorbs all of that. He absorbs the sin and into that space opened up by his forbearance, he pours his Holy Spirit and begins to make us new.

That's why Christian forbearance is different. Of course, non-Christians are perfectly able to practice cartilage virtues. Unbelievers can be patient and humble and gentle. Unbelievers can practice forbearance. But when you're rooted in Christ, your cartilage virtues drink from a deeper stream. Specifically, being in Christ helps you refrain from acting too forcefully and too quickly in conflicted situations, because you know that you don't have to fix every problem. Ultimately Jesus will make all things new. So you can be extra patient with each other because you know that God will act to make all things beautiful in his perfect timing. You can be extra gentle because you know that Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart and his power will move the mountains you can't move. You can be extra humble and readily admit that you don't know everything and that you might be wrong, because you know that history belongs to a God who can fathom all mysteries. And you can be extra forbearing with one another, you can put up with each other because you know how Jesus has been forbearing with you.

Thank God for his daily forbearance with you and me. May the Spirit continue to grow this virtue in us.