

***Doing Our Best***  
by Rev. Durrell Watkins  
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Rom. 14.1-12; Matt. 18.21-35

We all have disappointments, don't we? Personal trials. Let downs. I remember my great-aunt Gladys was always trying to lose a few pounds. She said to me once, "Durrell! I exercise an hour everyday. Every day, for a solid hour, I do this [slapping motion under chin]." I asked her, "Does that work?" She said "I guess. Look how thin these fingers are."

But, honestly, we do face challenges; isn't that right? I want to talk rather frankly about that today. One of the challenges that we face is betrayal. Not always a gigantic betrayal like someone stealing your money; sometimes it's a little betrayal like someone saying something untrue about your or being rude to you.

When I was a very young man, I had a habit of believing gossip. I don't know why. You know I like a good story, so maybe there was an element of drama to gossip that attracted me. And there were a few people when I first got into ministry who I prejudged...colleagues in fact. I had heard ugly things about them and believed those things without ever getting to know those people for myself.

That's not the worst of my sin though. I not only believed the gossip; I perpetuated it. I said mean things about people to whom I had never even spoken. Looking back 15, 16, 18 years, I'm embarrassed to admit that. But sadly, it is true.

One day, I was in an environment where I had to hear one my imagined adversaries preach. Before she opened her mouth I was rolling my eyes and wadding up my face. And then, the person I had decided was so awful began to preach and she was fabulous. She was funny. She was tender. She was erudite. She was smart. By the end of her sermon I was completely ashamed of my behavior.

After that service, I asked her if I could speak with her for just a moment. She graciously gave me a few minutes of her time. I said, "I owe you an apology. I've judged you and I've said unkind things about you based on second hand information that I don't even know to be true and I hope you can forgive me." And she did.

A few years down the road, she did something that I thought was pretty terrible. A year or two later, she came to me and apologized. She had already taught me the lesson of grace, and it was my privilege to offer her the forgiveness she once extended to me.

Now that's a personal story, not terribly comfortable to tell, but I share it because it shows the very real possibility of healing in our emotions, in our behavior, and in our relationships.

Since that time, I've been the target of more than a little gossip. Maybe it's my karma. Besides which, I'm a public figure and have been for a couple of decades. It comes with the job.

People naturally think they know me. Sometimes they imagine me to be much better than I really could be; and sometimes, they imagine me to be much worse than I really could be. And when I discover that someone has said something untrue about me, or when they have made a concerted effort to vilify me, it makes me angry. It makes me sad.

But what I have learned is that I have a choice. We can't control what people think, say, or do, and we sometimes can't control what happens anywhere...hurricanes happen, tornadoes happen, recessions happen; we can't control the world but we can control how we respond to what happens. We have the power of choice.

Now, I've spent too much time sharing about my failings, my growth, my learning, my healing. But I do so to make the point that I don't stand here as someone who never makes mistakes. I stand here not as someone better than you, but as someone who is committed to lifelong learning and spiritual growth and who is willing to share my life with you so that you may find hope and encouragement and empowerment for your own journey.

Perhaps you've experienced betrayal.

Maybe it was a co-worker who seemed to live to cause trouble.

Or an acquaintance who seemed incapable of telling the truth.

Or a neighbor whose previous address must surely have been 666 Brimstone Ave.

Or a relative who somehow inherited all the evil genes in the family.

Or a lover who you thought you knew and could trust who turned out to be someone else entirely.

Some of us have been betrayed by families who were more loyal to dogmas than to us.

Some of us have been betrayed by churches who told us that God loved us, and then tried to take it back.

Or by politicians who pledged to defend our rights even as they work to deny them.

Maybe the betrayal came not in the form of a personal relationship, but in a life circumstance. In the 1980s we discovered that many in our community were being betrayed by their own blood cells.

Maybe the betrayal comes from our finances. The source of aggravation isn't a lab report or a difficult person, but a stack of bills that keeps growing at an alarming rate.

If we've experienced any of these difficulties, or any trial that resembles them, our readings today can be a great comfort.

St. Paul addresses a difficult situation in today's first reading. You see, apparently there were those who ate meat, and others who didn't, and they must have been pointing the finger of blame and accusation at one another. Paul understood why some people in their religious zeal wouldn't eat meat. In antiquity, people would bring animals to temples and those animals would be sacrificed as a way of sharing a meal with the gods. But once the animal was killed, what happened to it? It became meat. The priests ate some. They would cook it and offer feasts for the community. Some of it would be sold in the market place.

So, in Rome , or Ephesus , or Alexandria , if you went shopping for some fresh meat, it might have been meat that had been sacrificed in a ceremony at the temple of Artemis , or Isis , or Jupiter, or Hera, or Bacchus. To make sure they wouldn't eat meat sacrificed to the gods of other religions, some people in the Jesus Community decided to not eat meat at all.

Paul says that attitude is a little fundamentalist, and not very mature. He calls such people "weak." But then he says, "If you eat meat, you don't have to be mean to those who don't; and vice versa." And then he explains why this issue is kind of petty. He says, "If you eat meat, do it for God as you understand God. And if you don't eat meat, then enjoy your vegetables for God as you understand God."

We don't all have to have the same understanding of God; as long as our search is genuine and we don't use it as an excuse to harm others, then we each will find what we need of God.

The point isn't the meat...the point is our spiritual journey. We are accountable not to the judgments of others, but to our own conscience and to the Spirit of Love that some of us call "God." That makes it easy to dismiss some of the hard feelings when we can say, "Oh, let me do my best and if others want to stir up madness rather than focus on their own growth, that's their choice; but I can choose a better way. I can remain focused on my desire to do better and to be better."

The bills aren't so scary when we can honestly say, "I'm doing my best. I know things will get better."

The dis-ease isn't so scary when we can honestly say, "I'm doing my best. And this condition isn't who I am."

The storms of life aren't so scary when we can honestly say, "I'm doing my best. And I'll get through this."

The sniper attacks of others aren't so scary when we can honestly say, "I'm doing my best. The people attacking me are acting out of their own pain and I don't have to play that game. I can go to peace instead of to pieces."

The gospel lesson teaches us to forgive people who misbehave...not to accept their behavior. It never says we aren't to hold them accountable or challenge their hatefulness, but even as we do, we can understand that their behavior wasn't motivated by their highest and best self. We can love the Christ in them even when we can't see it.

We forgive others not because they deserve it, but because they need it, and because we need to discover that we are the kind of people who are able to forgive. And sometimes, we find that we need forgiveness; and it's easier to accept it once we've developed the habit of offering it. We can even forgive ourselves. We can forgive institutions. Whenever we practice forgiveness, we are the better for it.

We don't even have to get it right at first...Jesus assumes we won't. That's why he said, "Keep trying...even if it takes 77 times...because it may!"

The difficulties in life may be very real, but so is our ability to face them, to transcend them, and to recover joy in spite of them. We have the power to forgive, to love, to hope, and to move forward. And that power can work miracles in our lives. This is the good news. Amen.

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**I am willing to do my best!  
I release the past to the past.  
I forgive those circumstances that were difficult.  
I forgive those people who were difficult.  
I even forgive myself for the mistakes I've made.  
I am now free.  
And my life is abundantly blessed...  
In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Ethicist Lewis B. Smede said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was you."