

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
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Romans 14:1–12
Matthew 18:21–35

LOVE IS WORTH THE LABOR

I wonder if any of you would admit this morning that not far beneath the surface there is some anger in you. If we are tired this morning, I wonder if we would admit that it's likely because we carry an extra burden of maintaining our status as victims. Someone has said the whole world is made up of victims who have been victimized by others who were victims. And I wonder if we could go back to a point in our lives when we weren't angry—you know, with that special someone over that special infraction that they had no idea about. Where would that place be—a place between acceptance and judgment?

It's hard sometimes, isn't it, to come to church and hold it inside; and so you come and if the time is just right, you look for a chance to tell someone else how you have been wronged. If we were raising hands this morning and being truly honest, how many would admit that they have not been loved the way they deserved to be loved by someone at some time? Who in this room would raise their hand and say they have been the victim of another person's anger? And who will admit that they have invested energy—intentional, directed, overt—and time and thought in pouting and wailing and complaining (yes, and throwing a little temper tantrum) because things did not always go the way you thought they should? You know what I mean.

How many of you have tried to leave the parking lot of Bush Hill Church on to Franconia Road where you make it to the median and look behind you (and remember, Franconia Road is four lanes at that point) and there is a line of cars in the left lane but nobody moves over to the right lane to let you in? Right? You just have to wait. This week, I made it to that median and I looked and there was a gap and so I still had my blinker on and I made my move for the gap, but low and behold, as I double-checked, this luxury car coming up was going to make sure the gap closed before I got there. It's happened to some of you. I know it has. No way was I getting in. So there were horns and there were glares, and then I recognized the person driving the luxury car—a colleague of mine, a fellow minister. Now I will probably never know if he did that on purpose because he recognized the very unministerial type vehicle that I drive, or what was really going on, but I let him go, and then he made sure that we were beside each other and he couldn't stop laughing.

So what is it this morning? Who can go to that place where you can admit you didn't get your way and you were impatient, where someone didn't give you the deference you deserve? It's interesting, isn't it, that in Romans it says in those first few words: "Welcome those who are weak," and then, Peter's question.

Another member of the church? Wow! It's as if Jesus knew that we were going to have a hard time in the church. The church would be one of the most difficult places for us to

practice forgiveness. It's a place brimming with people like me who need help getting our heads out of the past.

I tell you, I am amazed at all that I still have to understand about senior dementia or loss of capacity or Alzheimer's, or whatever my mother is experiencing, but one thing I don't care to reclaim—I do not miss the loss of memory for her of her bitter divorce from my father. The resentment and disillusionment of that part of her life took its toll. And Jesus said it doesn't have to. I think he knew it would be hard work for us in the church. I think Jesus knew that for us to move beyond our hurts and disappointment would take something miraculous. And so he talked about dealing with anger just before this passage, and he tries to help Peter.

Poor Peter. He really thinks for once he's got it right. See, the rabbis had taught him in children's church that three was the number of times you needed to forgive someone for something. Peter doubled that and then added a lagniappe (you can look that word up later) and he was certain he had everything in place. But Jesus knew that we are all too skilled at building walls made up of resentment. We do so to protect ourselves from being hurt again.

It's all kind of logical, isn't it? If we look at the way Matthew explains the story of the Gospel, we can see that dead center is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In Chapter 5, he talks about this great struggle we will face as disciples and as children and as friends and parents and spouses and citizens and employees—this hardest of all things to learn: true forgiveness, first of ourselves so that we can understand what it means to forgive someone else. I wonder what it would have been like if Jesus had just said to Peter: "Peter, as long as you refuse to accept responsibility for your own unhappiness, even God can't help you." That's a pretty strong statement, isn't it? But then that's because you are being your own god, aren't you?

Are you angry with a friend or a spouse who isn't making you very happy these days? Are you mad because your job isn't as fulfilling as you anticipated? I have to admit, before I came to this area I had never really experienced the concept of people who emphasize the importance of meaningful work to the extent that I have here. I mean really the idea that somehow there's work that's beneath a person was fairly foreign to me. I mean, work is work. That's what it's supposed to be, right? Jobs were never meant to be our ultimate fulfillment. In fact, we were supposed to only be fulfilled when we were whole—made whole by Christ in the way we performed our vocations or our jobs. If we want to be nurtured by our work, we should start with our Healer, the wounded Healer Henri Nouwen called our Savior. And really, is it our friend's or our spouse's job to make us happy? Don't we do that, with God's help, for ourselves? Are you already thinking about any of this? Are you mad at ... (you fill in the blank)? The resentment, the weakening of yourself spiritually and physically ... have you felt that you are tired of being tired?

Peter looks inside himself and asks: "When can I be done with this forgiveness stuff?" When can I get even, in essence? And Jesus says: "Peter, there is a reservoir of grievances in you that needs constant attention." When will we reject once and for all our rejection of ... (you fill in the blank)? The cross was hard work. But Jesus didn't reject it,

even though he could have, because it was beneath him. In fact, because he was so highly exalted, the work of reconciliation on the cross has all the more meaning.

There is a book about practicing our faith by Dorothy Bass, and she tells a story of a church member from the 1500s. And the records of the church actually have this person's story included in their minutes—like our Session minutes. And in the minutes it explains how this member has pretended that he can't remember *The Lord's Prayer*. I don't know if he later admits that he was pretending or how they found him out, but the book of minutes goes on to explain that he doesn't want to say *The Lord's Prayer* because he doesn't want to pray the words of Jesus that would require him to forgive the merchant who cheated him. There was no way he was about to let that happen.

Isn't it time to stop pretending that we don't know the Gospel and how far we miss the mark? Isn't it time that we say in this meal of thanksgiving and remembrance, there are words, like the words of *The Lord's Prayer*, that are either healing or burn like poison, because we are so resistant to allowing Christ's forgiveness, for us to become the forgiveness we have to share with one another. Maybe that's the real rub. For disciples, forgiveness is never optional. It's a mandate. Thanks be to God that it is. Amen.