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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/3/2008, Pentecost 12A
Matthew 14:13-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wish to speak to you this morning about forbearance. I mean to praise Jesus for his forbearance and to commend it to us as part of a good human life. Forbearance is part of the virtue of self-control.

I begin with our opening verse from this morning's Gospel Lesson:

When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart...(Matthew 14:13, KJV)

And what was the news our Lord heard, that he should depart from that place? The horrifying news of the death of John the Baptist, who was beheaded at the command of that fool King Herod, so entranced was he by a mere dancing girl.

Greatly to be praised is the virtue of forbearance. That is what Jesus illustrates for us in this morning's Gospel story. For he who had power to multiply the loaves and to calm the wind and the waves, also had power to punish King Herod, but he forbear. He did not use his strength that way.

The apostle James has a saying about wrath — wrath, that opposite of forbearance. The saying goes this way:

¹⁹Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: ²⁰For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.(James 1:19-20, KJV)

And is not that the truth? Many of us could well hang our heads and sigh at the nonsense we have done over the years, from cussing out inanimate objects to sudden deeds of unkindness toward others, which we have regretted. And so it is that the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Let us learn to be slow to speak, slow to wrath.

This story of Jesus feeding the multitude reveals his forbearance. We should strive for that virtue too. Christ is both our Saviour and our model of the godly life, and if we would be conformed to him, then we should strive for forbearance and compassion like his.

Let me begin speaking of our Lord's forbearance by noting a certain verb that appears again and again throughout the Gospel of St. Matthew¹. In Greek, the verb is *anachoreo* (pronounced "an-akh-o-reh'-o") It means to withdraw or to depart, to turn aside, or to give place. That is what Gospel people often do: In fact of danger or opposition, they withdraw.

It begins with the Magi:

¹ See, for example, Roger E. Van Harn in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, on this Gospel Lesson, Matthew 14:13-21.

And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they *departed* into their own country another way.(Matthew 2:12, KJV)

And then Joseph, the Protector of the Holy Family, being warned in a dream by the angel of the Lord that King Herod would seek to destroy the Christ child, withdrew from that region and fled down to Egypt:

he took the young child and his mother by night, and *departed* into Egypt... (Matthew 2:14, KJV)

Again, when King Herod had died, Joseph desired to return his family to Israel:

But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he *withdrew* to the district of Galilee.(Matthew 2:22, RSV)

When Jesus became a man, he too followed the pattern of withdrawal. For example, when he heard the news that John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod, Jesus withdrew from that place:

¹²Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he *departed* into Galilee;(Matthew 4:12, KJV)

Again, when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, he offends the Pharisees by doing that miracle on the Sabbath day. They plot against him, but Jesus does not stay and contend with them, but rather he withdraws:

¹³Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. ¹⁴Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him. ¹⁵But when Jesus knew it, he *withdrew* himself from thence: and great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all;(Matthew 12:13-15, KJV)

And now we come to this morning's passage, when Jesus hears that John has been beheaded:

When Jesus heard of it, he *departed* thence by ship into a desert place apart...(Matthew 14:13, KJV)

In the Twelfth Chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul urges Christians to be people of peace:

¹⁸If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.(Romans 12:18, KJV)

Repay no one evil for evil, Paul says.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”(Romans 12:21, RSV)

And so it is that the apostle urges Christians to follow the example of Jesus, who sought to live peaceably with all men. That is what Jesus did: when he heard of the death of John, Jesus withdrew.

But imagine our Lord’s frustration at the news of the death of John the Baptist. Jesus once said of John that he was the greatest person this world has ever known. He who is least in the kingdom of heaven might be greater than John, but of all us on this side of the kingdom, John was the greatest:

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.(Matthew 11:11, KJV)

Besides that, John was the kinsman of Jesus.

I guess that the greatest two people I have known in my life, other than my parents, were my old pastor, Raymond Shaheen, and my mentor, theologian Robert W. Jenson. Father Shaheen, of blessed memory, is safe and sound in the arms of Jesus, but Dr. Jenson still lives. Suppose I were to receive news that Jenson had been beheaded at the whim of some ruler. I would be furious. And if I had power to command the wind and the waves to be still, I would be awfully inclined to command that the wind and the waves should dash against that ruler’s house and destroy him.

But Jesus does no such thing. Rather, Jesus forbears. He departs from that place, and, judging from the Gospel story, we know for what purpose he withdraws: he seeks a quiet place apart where he can pray. That is how our Gospel Lesson concludes: with Jesus alone on the mountain in prayer.

But between hearing the troubling news of the death of John and turning to his heavenly Father in prayer, there was this random, but human factor of people pressing upon him wanting help. And the compassion of Jesus was such that he delayed even so good a thing as prayer in order to heal and feed the people.

The story goes this way: Jesus withdraws when he hears the news of the death of John. He travels by boat to a lonely place apart. He desires to pray. But when he steps ashore, he finds that the people have anticipated his move and rushed to new location:

¹⁴And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick.(Matthew 14:14, KJV)

The simple point I want to make about this story is that this too is part of the virtue of forbearance: that we forbear even something that is good if we have time to do something else that is necessary. Thus Jesus puts off his prayer for the sake of his compassion on the crowds.

Then, at last, Jesus turns to prayer:

²³And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.(Matthew 14:23, KJV)

In his treatise on prayer, Martin Luther quotes with approval an old saying about work and prayer:

“He who works faithfully prays twice.”

And so it is with your deeds of mercy and compassion in this world: Through such deeds, you are praying twice. You are praying at the end of the day when you lay your head down on the bed, and you are praying in the midst of the day when you minister to others in the name of Jesus.

In day to day life, you might occasionally find yourself stronger than your opponent. If you were to let loose, you could really tell someone off — someone on the street, someone in your home, someone in your place of work. If you are an athlete or a soldier or a person of powerful build, you might even be able to beat up your opponent. But remember Jesus did no such thing. As far as possible for him, he sought peace with all, and so he withdrew. He forebears.

Some of you have long been trying to walk a difficult path of Christian witness. Love for others moves you to commend Christ to them. And yet sometimes, your witness is unwelcome. In fact, it might cause a storm of protest and misery. Perhaps it will encourage you to know that Jesus himself often withdrew. He passed through many a town, many a village. In each town, some people seemed to welcome him, but some were hostile, many indifferent. And Jesus did not stay to slug it out with them. Rather, he moved on. He tried to maintain peace. He withheld his anger, his power, his twelve legions of angels, and moved on.

The trick is in determining how far is possible. There came a point where Jesus could withdraw no more. After his agonizing night of prayer in Gethsemane, it became clear to him that he could no longer slip away. The soldiers were coming, and this time he meant to stay. Why? Because if he had withdrawn this time, it would have meant slipping away from a world on the brink of death, from humanity, who needed him to stay and fight on their side. And fight he did, though it meant the loss of his life.

So, if we would be like Jesus, we will practice restraint and forbearance up to that point where slipping away simply costs others too much.

And so it is with forbearance as with all the other virtues too: the virtues are one. They bear each other in mind. Forbearance and withdrawal are only right to the degree that they fit with the other virtues of justice, courage, truth, love, hope, and faith. That is, let us keep our eye on Jesus, who is the truly virtuous One, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.