

Follow Jesus' Model

Romans 15:7-13

Can you remember the experience of walking into a church where you knew no one? What was that like for you?

Gwen and I have had that experience a number of times. Sometimes the greeting has been warm and friendly, other times it's been hard to get anyone's attention. It's a little awkward arriving as the guest speaker for the morning and being ignored by everyone in the foyer until I had to interrupt an usher having a long conversation to ask him where I might find the pastor and service leader.

I remember one time when I was on tour with a group from Bethany and I had stayed at a friend's place who dropped me off at the church well after the choir had been there and set up. As I entered the foyer a man and woman came up to me and asked if I was new there. They had no official badge, and yet it was like they were on mission to make me feel warmly welcomed. I found out later that they made a regular practice of this, even though they weren't on any official "greeter" list of the church.

What a wonderful experience. Here these people didn't know me from Adam and yet went out of their way to be a blessing to me. That's the kind of welcome I've come to expect in our church. I know, no church is perfect, and we have plenty of flaws, individually and as a group. But I hope that welcoming people always remains a strength for us.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he opened the letter with a declaration of the truth of the Gospel and the anticipation of a warm welcome from the church when he finally got there in person. We know from the book of Acts that he received a hero's welcome from the believers when he arrived in Rome as a prisoner.

As he writes, Paul explains the Gospel in detail, including where Jews and Gentiles fit into God's plan, and then he goes on to explain the lifestyle that should flow from believing the Gospel. Last, he turns to a specific issue plaguing the church, the issue of a difference of opinion on eating only kosher meat or ignoring where the meat in the market came from. People in the church had begun to separate from one another because of this. He urges the believers to be of one mind, respecting one another, and treating each other's convictions gently and honourably.

How does the gospel speak to this?

Well, Paul's presentation of the Gospel in Romans goes like this,

We have all messed up our lives by doing things we knew were wrong. That means everyone comes to God on the same footing, none of us deserve God's mercy and grace, we all deserve the horror of eternal separation from God.

But God took the initiative to reach out to us in Jesus. Jesus fulfilled God's rightful expectations for humanity by living a life of complete obedience to God. Then, because his goodness was exposing the corruption and evil of the religious and political leaders of the day, they had him tortured and executed.

But this was God's plan all along, that one perfect sacrifice be given to cleanse away the filth of all sin and rebellion. God exonerated Jesus by raising him from the dead and seating him in a place of highest honour in heaven.

Now Jesus offers us freedom from our guilt and reconciliation with God and one another simply by believing in him. Nothing we do or say has any bearing on this offer. We simply choose to accept this gift or not. When we accept Jesus' offer we become part of God's family which includes all the heroes of faith from the Old Testament and the New. If we don't accept this gift then we remain apart from God, choosing to distance ourselves from him.

As part of God's freedom family we choose to pattern our lives on the model of life that Jesus lived and taught. We are given God's Holy Spirit to enable us to live the Jesus way day-by-day. And out of our gratitude for all this we offer our lives to God on an ongoing basis to use as He pleases. And we gather together with others who follow the Jesus way to be a joint testimony to all those around us.

As Paul comes to the end of the teaching portion of the book he writes, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ (the Messiah) has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7).

That emphasizes how we must connect with Christians who see things differently than we do. Our goal should be to welcome them the way Jesus welcomed us into the family of God. Our past, our peculiarities, our manners, our looks, our social status, our lifestyle did not put Jesus off. He embraced us as we were, not counting our sins or stupidity against us. Indeed, while we were still enemies of God Jesus died for us.

Now remember, that this church was made up of two distinct ethnic groups, the Jews and the non-Jews. And Paul writes,

Let me tell you why [accepting one another is so important]: the Messiah became a servant of the circumcised people in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of God – that is, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, and to bring the nations to praise God for his mercy.

Imagine a church in the southern states, half white and half black. I wonder how they would have lived out welcoming one another in the 1950's? Imagine today in Arizona a church where half voted for Trump and half voted for Biden, how should they welcome each other? God intended that his church break the barriers between races, between social classes, between political ideologies, between men and women, between educated and non-educated, between locals and foreigners, and on the list could go. The church is a jumble of humanity, a reversal of that which has been dividing us since sin first came. God intends that the love and acceptance within the church will show the world a reflection of God's own love and acceptance for all people.

Paul says, Jesus came as a servant of one ethnic group, the Jews, so that he could fulfill God's promise to Abraham to make him a blessing to all peoples, all ethnic groups. When God called Abraham, the father of both the Jews and the Arabs, he promised him that he would bring a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3).

The purpose of the people of Israel was to bless the world around them; just as the purpose of the Church is to be a light and blessing to the people around us. And Paul gives evidence from the Hebrew Scriptures of the fact that this has been God's intent all along.

As the Bible says:

That is why I will praise you among the nations,
and will sing to your name.

And again it says,

Rejoice, you nations, with his people.

And again,

Praise the Lord, all nations,
and let all the peoples sing his praise.

And Isaiah says once more:

There shall be the root of Jesse,
the one who rises up to rule the nations;
the nations shall hope in him.

From Samuel the prophet to David the psalmist, from Moses in the law to Isaiah' prophecies of the coming King, the Scriptures ring with the announcement that all peoples will praise the Lord together. And the church is the first sign of this future reality.

Paul opened this letter with a declaration of the power of the gospel.

“For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life.’”

The Gospel is good news for the church and the unchurched, it is good news to the model citizen as well as the worst felon, it's power to transform touches the rich and the poor, the CEO and the lowest person on the totem pole, the society snob and the derelict begging on the street corner. In Jesus' day, the only people it didn't touch were those who thought that they had no need of salvation and those whose contact with religion made them immune to true connection with God.

You and I need the Gospel every day. We need the embrace of God's love when we rise in the morning and when we lay down at night. We need the assurance of our deliverance when we fail and when we succeed. We need the model of Jesus' love and acceptance when we face people we keep away from and the people we share our every day with. There is no part of my life where I do not need the light of the Gospel every day, yes, every minute of every day (and on 'those days,' every second).

Surely this unstoppable, untameable, relentless, reckless love calls for songs of loudest praise. It is enough to set the whole world singing. And while we choose not to express that together in this unusual time out of our care for the well-being of one another, I am going to raise the roof of my vehicle as I drive home today. The Scriptures say to make music in our hearts and to give thanks continually (Ephesians 5:19,20). The music in our hearts joins with the music of all creation in unceasing praise to our Creator and Redeemer.

No wonder Paul closes with this incredible blessing.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hope is what we need today, what the world needs. Let's take time to pray this blessing for each other this week. Each day think of someone who you see here today, and someone in our fellowship who is not here and pray this blessing for them. And as we continue to do that the ice that has frozen our hearts in relation to this person or that person will thaw, and we will be able to welcome them in love, just as God has welcomed us into His wonderful family.

The symbol of that welcome is the cup and bread we share. This morning I invite those of you who have accepted this gift of God, who have chosen the Jesus' way, to join together in honouring Jesus in our act of remembering. This is a reenactment of what Jesus did with his first followers the night before he was betrayed, tortured and executed.

When the time came, Jesus and the apostles sat down together at the table. Jesus said, "I have been very eager to eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins. For I tell you now that I won't eat this meal again until its meaning is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God."

Then he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. Then he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. For I will not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God has come."

He took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

After supper he took another cup of wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you (Luke 22:14-20).