

The Harmonious Life

Romans 15:4-13

⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name";

¹⁰ and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";

¹¹ and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him";

¹² and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We live in a world that loves to sing about peace on earth and harmonious living this time each year; but we seem to have difficulty living up to our desires now and any time of the year! Every day we open the newspaper or turn on our television, radio, Internet or smart phone and hear of another incident of violence. In recent years we have also learned about long standing exploitation, abuse, human trafficking, domestic violence, terrorism, bullying and hate crimes. Last week we heard about a family who posted their holiday picture and that they received hate messages about how their child was dressed and the length of his finger nails. We seem to live in a world where there is disharmony. Maybe part of our difficulty is our relationship or lack of relationship with God.

The search for God begins with our acceptance of the human. Christians believe this, says the pastoral theologian John Heagle, "Because it is in the stable of humanity that God has come in search of us." In this season of anticipating the birth of Christ, an

understanding of incarnation enlivens, enables, and encourages us to live as Christ did.

"Accept one another, therefore, as Christ has accepted you" (v. 7).

The Jesuit theologian Peter van Breemen wonderfully develops this theme of acceptance, this theology of God's radical love. One of the deepest needs of the human heart, he says, is to be accepted and valued. Every human being wants to be loved, but there is an even deeper love, a love of acceptance. Every human being craves to be accepted, accepted for who one is, not for what one has done or achieved or merited.

"A friend is someone who knows everything about you and still accepts you," van Breemen says, quoting Augustine. "That is the dream we all share: that one day I may meet the person with whom I can really talk, who understands me and the words I say—who can listen and even hear what is left unsaid, and then really accepts me. God is the ultimate fulfillment of this dream."

Nothing is so crippling, van Breemen goes on, as the experience of not being fully accepted. When I am not accepted, a deep, unnamed emptiness pervades my being. A baby who is not welcomed is ruined at the roots. A young athlete who is not accepted by the coach performs poorly.

Acceptance means that my friends and family give me a feeling of self-esteem, a feeling of being worthwhile. They are happy that I am simply as I am. Acceptance means that I can grow at my own pace. I am encouraged and supported, but not forced.

The craving for acceptance can absorb all our creative energies. It is comparable to the physical craving caused by rickets, a softening of the bones due to a deficiency of vitamin D. Children with rickets, over a century ago, would scratch the lime out from the walls to feed their bones. In the same way, people who are not accepted attempt to scratch out acceptance from others. They may develop rigidity because of their lack of security, or they may resort to boasting, a not-so-subtle way to provide themselves with the praise they so badly crave.

The twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich claims that *faith is the courage to accept acceptance*. I am accepted by God as I am, not as I should be. But, this requires

an act of faith. It requires the courage to embrace Acceptance, that is to embrace God's very self. God absolutely, fully accepts me and intimately knows my name: "See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" says Isa. 49:16.

It is one thing to know I am accepted and quite another to embrace it. It takes a long time to believe that I am accepted by God as I am. Basic faith is that I know myself to be accepted by God. Self-acceptance can never be based on my own self, my own qualities, or my own herculean efforts. Such a foundation would collapse. Self-acceptance is an act of faith. When God loves me, I must accept myself as well. I cannot be more demanding than God, can I?

Our scripture proclaims that *Christ accepted you for the glorification of God* (vv. 7, 9). The glorification of God will be possible only if the acceptance enacted by Christ flows through to mutual acceptance of one another, in particular those "weak in faith." Whatever you and I have received from God is bound to spread to others.

Israel understood its call this way: "The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you. ... It was because the LORD loved you" (Deut. 7:6-8).

This deeper, divine acceptance leads to harmony in the community and to glorifying God "together" and "with one voice" (v. 6). Granting their differences, Paul prays that they might have joy and peace with each other.

The gospel speaks of a God who accepts us as we are. We are capable of accepting others because Christ has accepted us. Barriers are down. We belong.

We are all slow learners in the church. In the "school for sinners," most of us are in the remedial class, but the first and absolute necessity is that we accept that we are accepted. To grow in that awareness is to grow into the potential of truly accepting others. "Love your neighbor as yourself," says God in Lev. 19:18; and Mark 12:31.

Patrick J. Howell

Living as we do in a world that draws boundaries all the time and in every possible way, we need to hear this message often. From the time we are old enough to be in school, we know all too well the patterns of forming "in-groups" and "outcasts." There are people who are cool and those who are not; there are those who get power and influence because of good looks or athletic prowess; there are those who grab power by being bullies. We learn this as children, and we can see the effects of this behavior in almost every aspect of adult life—in business, education, politics, and even the church.

Paul calls Christians, you and me, to another way of living, another way of relating: Welcome one another. It is a model of gracious reciprocity based on the knowledge and insights: God has already welcomed *all*—and so there is no longer slave or free, Jew or Greek, male and female (Gal. 3:28); no longer rich or poor, black or white or Hispanic or Asian, no longer gay or straight, no longer evangelical or progressive, no longer free-market capitalist or socialist or libertarian. God has welcomed us all ... just as we are ... into God's embrace.

Paul wants to make sure that his audience knows that he is not just making this up, that this is not the result of some wild-eyed idea he has come up with all by himself. No, God's intention to make known this plan of wide embrace is already there in "whatever was written in former days" (v. 4). The clues to God's intentions have been there all along, Paul says. It is now, in the light of Christ, that we can see the true meaning of these scriptures. So Paul brings out four citations of Hebrew Scripture that point to the inclusion of the Gentiles; the "other." "Rejoice, O Gentiles. ... praise the Lord, all you Gentiles!" (vv. 10-11) He saves the best for last, a word that believers were coming to see as a foretelling of the birth of Jesus: "The root of Jesse shall come ... in him the Gentiles shall hope" (v. 12). **Cynthia M. Campbell**

The great medieval monk Bernard of Clairvaux explained that there are four stages of growth in Christian maturity: (1) love of self for self's sake; (2) love of God for self's sake; (3) love of God for God's sake; (4) love of self for God's sake. God emptied himself so that he might become flesh like us (see Phil. 2:5-11).

Much of the self-help literature and world of advertising asserts, by way of contrast, that you must "love yourself," that "you deserve to be pampered," that the first love is "love of self." This basic love is certainly critical, but it can be self-deceiving.

The challenge of our scripture is that ultimately love reaches out to the other, expands the boundaries of self, even empties the self of all self-seeking, for the sake of Christ, because that is precisely what God has already done. **Patrick J. Howell**

Paul's prayer is that God give the Romans "harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ" (v. 5). Such harmony is not peace for the sake of peace, but "so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 6). Our world has forgotten that we human creatures exist, not for the fulfillment of ourselves, but for the glory of God. The text goes on to encourage believers to "welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you" (v. 7). So welcome the children, welcome the outcasts, welcome the foreigners. We, together, are all his people, the sheep of his pasture.

No one who has lived for a time in our fractured, fractious world or held membership in the often fractured, fractious church can deny that peace and unity are conditions to which we are not naturally inclined, at least not since the exit from Eden. Paul reminds us that regardless of our natural inclinations to look down upon "the other," God has a different idea in mind for the human race. At one time, the Gentiles were perceived to be outsiders, but now both Gentiles and Jews are included in the covenant God made with "the patriarchs" (v. 8). God expands the covenant. Unity comes, not because somebody had the big idea to be inclusive, but because that is the way God wants us to be, intended us to be in the first place.

"Peace on earth, good-will among those whom God favors": this is the message the angels will sing, come Christmas Eve. Until then, may the church be the demonstration project of the peaceable and harmonious kingdom God intends. When we understand who we are in Christ we can live the harmonious life in Him! **Joanna M. Adams**

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