

Connecting with Our Neighbors
Romans 15:1-13 and Psalm 27:1, 4-9
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Romans 15: 1-13

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' 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. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 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, 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';

and again he says,

'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people';

and again,

'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him';

and again Isaiah says,

'The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

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.

The imperative to care for our neighbor is found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament. It was always God's plan to bring all the people together. The Parable of the Good Samaritan told in the Gospel of Luke is often defined as a clear example of who are neighbor is. In the story Jesus is asked by a lawyer, "who is my neighbor?" Jesus proceeds in telling the parable of the good Samaritan. About the traveler on the road who is set upon by robbers and beaten and left on the road.

Two people pass by and do nothing, and then along comes a Samaritan, an enemy of the Jews, who helps the traveler, binds his wounds takes him to an inn and pays for his care. When Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' Can it be much clearer?

Even if you are not familiar with this parable, the secular world understands the idea of the Good Samaritan. We have Good Samaritan laws. A good samaritan in legal terms refers to someone who renders aid in an emergency to an injured person on a voluntary basis. ... Under the good samaritan laws which grant immunity, if the good samaritan makes an error while rendering emergency medical care, he or she cannot be held legally liable for damages in court.

Paul takes the historical understanding held by the Jew's about neighbor and brings to it the "new neighbor," that is the Gentile. Paul tells them that now they have been brought together, Jews and Gentiles, now there is no turning away from each other. Meaning they are to stay in it together, and so we are to stay in it together as well. We are to follow the ways of Christ, the way of radical hospitality, to continually reach out to each other, even when our hand has been slapped away.

If we are reaching out as the body of Christ, then if we turn away and say I have had enough, this is too hard, we are turning away from God. Turning away from the one who came to save us, who brings us new life.

It is hard work, and I'm not sure if we are aware of the magnitude of our responsibility. This is especially difficult in our present culture that treasures

the individual. This command is to not turn away from our neighbor, even when we view that neighbor as our enemy, or if they view us in the same light.

And when we find it overwhelming, we can't hide from it. The people who gathered in Christ in Rome stayed in their groups, they held on to their comfortable traditions. Do we?

In the chapter before this, chapter 14, Paul sets this up as he writes about the conflict between those who keep the food laws and those who do not.

Remember, this community is composed of Jews/ and Gentiles who follow Jewish law,/ and Gentiles who did not. It's believed they gathered in small house churches for regular worship, but sometimes they would all come together. On a regular basis this wouldn't be a problem because they tended to gather with people like them, but when they all came together and shared a meal/ the conflict arose. They continued to see them as other, even as they claimed to be brothers and sisters in Christ. How do we as people change these traditions that seem to be embedded in us?

Three things happened in the past two days that hammered at this question, and it was clearly the movement of the Holy Spirit/ who once again was pointing, saying pay attention. Friday in my class at the Center for Religion and Psychotherapy in Chicago we talked about the value of the "willing suspension of disbelief" in the therapeutic relationship. To not bring our stuff into the relationship but to first listen to the client's story openly without judgement or assumption. Then yesterday we had a workshop here in the church on Polarization, and learned how hearing the story of the other can bring us to a better understanding. And finally, I attended a funeral where I witnessed the invaluable presence of our neighbors as we grieve, and again how the story informs us. The story of the deceased and God's story. Then I go to finish my sermon and my head is about to explode with the connections. The connections with our neighbors and how we might connect.

It was story and empathetic listening. That was the message loud and clear. That when we share our stories and listen with an empathetic ear, we are able

to see the other, our neighbors near and far, and they are able to see us. In all the spaces and places we find ourselves in.

I mentioned the workshop yesterday on polarization. Mike and Mary McGillicuddy presented, something that sounds pretty close to what we are hearing about in the Romans passage, that we tend to live pretty much the same way today. We gravitate and join in with those who have the same views that we do.

The conflict arises when we gather as a larger group, with people who have views that are very different from our own. Unfortunately, today we have all seen how volatile those conversations can become. I think the Apostle Paul would see something familiar in this.

So, here in chapter 15 Paul brings it together with the understanding that if we are to care for each other, and like those who are strong put the concerns of the other ahead of their own, things can be different. We need to understand and listen to our neighbor's story to know what those concerns are. In Romans, it is about food. Food is an easy example, it is not threatening to our belief system, or our schema.

If we build up our neighbor as Paul urges, then we need to remove anything that will get in their way. If someone will feel uncomfortable or stressed about eating something, don't have it at the meal. A host with radical hospitality will understand the dietary needs of each guest and come up with a menu that is pleasing to everyone, they will not put up a barrier.

You can create a delicious meal that doesn't include wheat, dairy, or meat, or any other food that one of your guests can't eat. Because after all, most gatherings are primarily about the people attending, not the food.

If we don't have any food restrictions, we are not usually aware of the othering that can take place when we don't take the needs of the other into account. In hearing their story we can adapt and accommodate.

We can see this in our polarizing conversations as well. Here again the importance of shared stories come into play. We have the opportunity to understand each other. Instead of approaching each other with assumptions, we can approach them with curiosity. Curiosity to understand where they are and who they are. This is obvious at funerals; we want to know about the deceased, and the family wants that loved one to be known.

We all have schema, the way in which we order our beliefs and through which we make our meaning. Our schema is create around our own life experience and can hold untrue assumptions. But if we share our deep truths and what makes meaning for us, we can come together. We can find those connecting points that will move us closer. And why do we want to do this, get closer to our neighbor?

Listen again to verses 5 and 6:

⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God calls us to live in harmony with one another, and God is always with us in this, encouraging us. Harmony is impossible if we look at life through our own lens, and not taking the time or interest in knowing our neighbor. Not just understanding our neighbors here at this church or this community, but we need to understand every neighbor.

We have an opportunity with this wonderful open space outside these doors. A space to gather and tell our stories to each other and encourage others to share. A space in which we can practice our storytelling that will allow us to move out and connect with neighbors we have never meet.

There is plenty of time to share if we remember that we are in this for the long haul, it doesn't have to be all at once. Every bit that is shared builds the picture, starts to fill in the canvas. Getting to know each other moves us from the stranger, the other, to neighbor. That is one of the things I love about dinner church. The idea of dinner church was birthed from this idea of

hospitality found in knowing each other. On Work trip, the experience of working side by side changes you and forces you to see no longer see the other as a stranger.

Once you create the environment and eat together you are no longer one and the “other.” You are known to each other, you are more intimate neighbors. This can happen in just 15 to 30 minutes, in the time it takes to prepare the meal and set up.

So how are we to further this plan that God calls us to? Each month we hear about a mission partner we support. Mission opportunities are wonderful, but we often approach them as stand-alone occasional opportunities. The stretch is to have a real relationship. Something that is sustaining, where we have the opportunity to forgive when we are hurt or disappointed as well as for us to be

Opportunities to be truly human with each other, to live with the good and not so good in ourselves as well as our neighbor. We are fortunate to have Stew Kerr as our mission director. He understands the importance of relationship and started forming them with our mission partners, so that they will be just that partners.

Are you reaching out? We don't love and support our neighbor by proxy, we are called to love and care for our neighbor through connecting with them, by forming relationships, person to person relationships not only institution to institution relationships. How are you changed in a person to person relationship? God does not call us to care for our neighbor purely for our neighbor's sake, it is for our benefit as well. I encourage you to find a ministry to connect with, find a new neighbor to know.

Vivek H. Murthy, became the U.S. surgeon general in late 2014. Among the items he listed as big public health care issues were emotional well-being and loneliness. He has been writing about the impact the workplace has on those issues, and about how the “loneliness epidemic” plays out on the job.

In a new cover story in the Harvard Business Review, Murthy treats loneliness like a public health crisis, and the workplace as one of the primary

places where it can get better — or worse. “Our social connections are in fact largely influenced by the institutions and settings where we spend the majority of our time,” Murthy says. “That includes the workplace.” And I would add school and the church as well.

In the Harvard Business Review article, Murthy writes that “we live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s.” The deacons have a visitation ministry. Ask one of them about it and visit a neighbor who is caught in this epidemic.

We are to accept each other for the glory of God, not the glory of 100,000 followers or likes on Facebook or Instagram. Because that is to the glory of one’s self. When we can glorify God in one voice, neighbor standing with neighbor, we will get a glimpse of the kingdom, and the harmony that God calls us to.

This call to harmony is to be neighbor connected to neighbor. Explore where you find harmony, explore where your neighbor finds harmony, and see where that leads. Can we move ourselves to put our praise for God above our own schema, our own ideals, and praise God with one voice?

And so I will end with a question asked by the Presbyterian pastor - Fred Rodgers one that maybe we can become comfortable asking - Won't you be my neighbor?