

Let Us Adore Him

PEACE

Romans 15:4-13

1. Disagreements and disunity.

2. Unity in disagreement.
- Ephesians 4:1-6

3. Unity through Christlikeness (holiness).
- Matthew 5:9; Romans 8:14

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Does it feel to you like our country is divided now more than ever? Statistics show that we are nearly split down the middle politically; 46% of us identify as Democrat and 43% identify as Republican. That means that there are 11% that are undecided or independent or something else. And yet across the board, all three groups have shown a steady decline in their confidence in the US Government. In 1972, 70% had faith in their government. In 2022, that number is around 30% across the board. And even though members of both parties feel that way, they both believe it is the other party's fault! Then, beyond our own nation, there is so much conflict and war in the world.

In our contentious world of violence and discord, peace might seem like a fairy tale, especially the type of peace that gives us one voice and one mind, but that's what the Apostle Paul writes about in the book of Romans. That kind of peace might seem impossible given the current state of things, where everything feels fragile, and conflict seems to always be just under the surface. But today is the Sunday in Advent when we light the peace candle and reflect on the peace of Christ and the possibility for peace in our world. We are left with questions about peace: Is peace possible? And is peace the absence of conflict, or is it something else entirely?

There is a Scripture passage in Romans 15 that lays out instructions on peace by how we ought to live with one another. It's the passage that is in our Advent reading for today from the devotional we are all going through together, called "Let Us Adore Him."

Let me read that Scripture passage today, and would you help me honor God's Word by standing with me as I read it?

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."

Again, it says,

“Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.”

And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him.”

And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:4-13, niv)

The passage tells us that those who are strong bear with the failings of the weak. We care for our neighbors. We are to have the same attitude as Christ toward one another. These line up well with an idea of living at peace with others. But the foundation of peace—this foundation of learning to live in community with one another—isn’t a removal of conflict and never approaching difficult topics or conversations and never having hard words with each other. Instead, the foundation is Christ. Aligning one’s attitude with Christ is what brings about one mind and one voice and by which we glorify God.

This season is one when we talk about peace on earth often, but if Romans 15 is any indication, then it is true what the songwriters say about peace beginning with us. This isn’t about winning an argument or avoiding an argument but about what it means to build a foundation on Christ that ultimately leads to one mind and one voice with those around us.

We may not be able to control the amount of peace that is achieved in our halls of government or politics or even our nation’s social concerns, or nations at war with each other, but there is one thing we *can* control: we can control that peace is practiced in West Valley Church. Remember that we’ve said that the church is a signpost to the community for the Kingdom of God; the community of West Valley should be able to look at us and see what the Kingdom of God looks like. The degree to which we live out the peace of Christ is a major part of our witness to West Valley. So let’s learn from this passage we just read, starting with seeing that Paul was addressing a serious issue in the church, and that was their...

1. Disagreements and disunity.

The members of the church were allowing their disagreements to divide them.

You and I had quite a bit of disagreement last week – you all seemed to disagree with me. Do you remember that? I had mentioned that lately I have ended my morning hot shower by turning the water all the way to cold for at least 30 seconds. When I said that, there was this visceral reaction from all of you; it was like I said I torture puppies or something. There was very little peace in that moment and quite a bit of conflict! But hopefully that didn’t affect our unity in Christ! I think you still love me; I know I still love you! But that was not the case with the church in Rome.

In order to fully understand this text in chapter 15, we've got to explore the context of Romans 14. In that chapter, Paul is speaking about the eating practices of Christians, talking about how some who have a strong faith eat meat while those with weaker faith eat only vegetables. That doesn't mean if you eat meat, you have stronger faith. And it wasn't because of health issues or animal cruelty issues.

It was about meat offered to idols in the pagan temples. At the time, the meat that was offered to the different gods in their temples of worship would be taken out the back door and then sold at the market or would be served in restaurants. This is likely the type of meat that Paul is talking about. Some Jews felt that eating this meat would mean that they were supporting idol worship and false religions. But other Christians felt like it didn't matter – meat was meat, neither clean or unclean.

If it were today, Paul would've said, "You know that in the market isn't any different in the meat in your McDonald's burger." Well, maybe not, since I'm not sure it's really meat in a McDonald's burger! But the church was divided and disunified over this issue.

Paul brings up this same issue in 1 Corinthians 8 as well, where he says he doesn't see an issue with eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols because idols are nothing, but he is also careful to say he will not be a stumbling block to those who disagree with him.

The debate seems to be that some Christians view the meat as no problem, and not a hindrance to their faith, whereas others view it as equal to idol worship. Those on either side of this argument were judging the other on what was the correct way to worship God.

Paul tells them not to judge one another, strongly challenging them not to create a stumbling block for others with their choices. That's what's happening in chapter 14, which sets us up to better understand chapter 15.

Chapter 15 then moves into this idea that those who are strong in their faith will look out for the well-being of those who are weak. He's saying that the focus is not to be on what is best for *me* and *my* relationship with Christ (whether I can eat meat if I want to), but on what is good for our neighbors – for the other believers in my church – for what builds up the community. So when it comes to the priority of peace in the church, the higher emphasis is on submission and selflessness. In other words, to live in community means looking out for the well-being of others, not just my own rights. Living in community at times means putting aside our own desires in order to build up the community. This does *not* mean everyone agrees. There was clearly a lot of disagreement about this issue.

Let me give you a more recent example: how our church chose to respond to the pandemic. There were two responses that people chose – one was to abide by what the government said, get vaxxed, masked, and social distanced. The other disagreed, and felt that those mandates were at best shaky science or government overreach and infringement on our rights, and at worst some kind of government totalitarian conspiracy. And it seemed like both of those viewpoints converged especially in churches. It wasn't an easy time, was it?

You know that our church chose to err on the side of safety. We needed to choose the response that would protect the most vulnerable among us, giving up our rights for their sake. Our reasoning was, if we chose to abide by the health guidelines but we ended up wrong, the worst that would happen is that we were inconvenienced. But if we chose to

disregard the guidelines and we were wrong, the worst that would happen is that people would get sick or even die. We decided to err on the side of precaution. So, whenever we gathered together, we asked folks to respect the health department guidelines. But we certainly did not require or demand that outside of church, in your private life, that you should choose one way or the other. In fact, we used this passage and the one from Corinthians as our guide in that response.

You will never know the level of garbage I had to endure, and the vitriol that came from a few people. Occasionally I had to deal with phone calls and emails accusing me of all kinds of things; that I was promoting the end of democracy, that they were ashamed and disappointed in me because I had no faith that God would protect us. By the way, *I* didn't even agree with some of the health requirements and guidelines, but that wasn't the point for me.

So some said I wasn't a Christian, or worse yet in their minds, a Democrat. You think I'm making this up, but I'm not. There was a couple of people who I thought were my friends, people that I worshiped with, was in small groups with, and even went on mission trips with who said horrible things to me and about me. One guy in our church was saying those things about me, so I called him to talk about it. I no sooner said hello, and then for the next sixty minutes I listened to him yell at me, saying I lived in fear and not in faith, that I was leading the church on the path to communism and hell and that I was a lazy, weak, and terrible leader. He even told me my preaching bored his kids to death. He went on and on. I literally did not even speak in that first 60 minutes. When he finally stopped, I tried to discuss the issues with him, but he cut me off and told me that he and his family would no longer attend this church. He said they were going to attend a church that actually had faith because they weren't requiring masks. My heart broke as he chose his differences of political opinions over his unity in Christ with the church. Still, your Leadership Team – your church board – courageously led our church and fought for unity throughout that difficult time.

Now, even though those were tough times, all of you maintained the unity of your church. For some of you, even though you did not agree with our position, you chose the unity of your church over that. I can't describe how deeply I respect you and appreciate you for that. You chose the biblical response of...

2. Unity in disagreement.

The issue I just shared about was *very much* like this one that Paul is writing about; some people were choosing disagreement over unity. Paul's point was not that everybody had to agree, but that there could be unity in disagreement. Even though the community of faith might disagree over some things, we all have the same foundation, which is Christ. That is biblical peace.

The one mind and one voice that we have are a result of Christlikeness. Christ is the example of love, of compassion, of caring for one another, of submission, of sacrifice, and of selflessness. So, as we grow in our discipleship, God by his Spirit within us gives us the

endurance and encouragement to be made more like Christ, thus exhibiting the qualities of Christ to each other.

The idea of “one mind and one voice” is what Paul wrote about to the Church in Ephesus. He wrote:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6, niv)

Paul talks about one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. The people are united not because they agree on everything but because they have the same foundation.

Accepting one another doesn't happen automatically; it is not in our nature to do that. But we do it because we have been accepted by Christ. Christ accepts us, he loves us, and he died for us, even when he disagreed with pretty much everything we were doing! But he loves us and accepts us and died for us so we could be set free from sin and free to love and serve each other; so that we could live in peace with one another even when we don't agree. As we become more like Christ, we align ourselves with the mind of Christ. Christ accepts us where we are, feeble faith and all, so we are to accept one another, feeble faith and all.

I get to teach the Adult Bible Class that we have every Sunday morning at 9am, and for part of the summer and all of the fall, we were in a series called “A Charitable Discourse.” In that series, we talked about numerous issues that people in the church have differing opinions on; we talked about racism, the use of alcohol, we talked about abortion, about homosexuality and LGBTQIA plus issues, we talked about labeling others, about traditional marriage and human sexuality, we talked about politics, we talked about fundamentalism, we talked about civil disobedience, we talked about war and pacifism, creation versus evolution, the emerging church, and social media. And in many of those topics, we did not talk about which side was right or which was wrong. We had people in class from our young adults to our senior adults, and we had people with different opinions. But we listened to each other, respected each other, and learned to be unified even in things we didn't agree on. That's the point of what Paul is talking about. That is what peace is, and it's something you can't find anywhere except in the church, the family of God, the body of Christ.

So, in this passage, Paul again emphasizes Jesus's servanthood. Jesus became a servant so that God might be glorified. Therefore, we become servants because we see Christ's example of servanthood, and our lives lived in unity with one another lead to God being glorified.

The author A.W. Tozer wrote this amazing statement:

“Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So, one hundred

worshippers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become “unity” conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”¹

That’s what happens when we are each focused on Christ instead of our particular differences. There is...

3. Unity through Christlikeness (or in other words, what we are talking about is holiness).

Paul gives harsh words to the church, calling them to something greater. He calls out their favoritism and tells them to learn to elevate one another. He calls out their judgmentalism and tells them to embrace everyone. He calls out their exclusionary systems and tells them to look upon others the way Christ looks upon them. This is the way of holiness, or what it looks like when we are filled with God’s Spirit. This is what Jesus meant when he said:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5:9, niv)

When we are making peace with each other in the church, Jesus says we are the children of God.

And who are the children of God? The Bible says:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. (Romans 8:14, niv)

So when we allow God’s Spirit to fill us, to make us holy, to make us like Christ, we are the children of God. Our unity comes from our Christlikeness.

Now, it would be easy to think that peace in a church is just the absence of conflict. But please see that Paul isn’t avoiding conflict or confrontation, because he knows that the way to true peace in community is to confront the things that are keeping the community of faith from looking like Jesus. The way to live at peace in community with one another is not to ignore the issues but to be reminded of Who we are called to be like in those issues, and that is Jesus. This is not a call to keep peace by doing certain things or not doing certain things, but a reminder that because we are in this together, this is who we are: like Christ. Paul is reminding the faith community of the mercy and grace Christ showed them that they should be showing one another.

Where in our community do we need to be confronted with our judgmentalism, favoritism, or exclusionary practices? Where do we need to be reminded of our foundation and identity in Christ? When have we ignored conflict for the sake of a false sense of peace, instead of doing the hard work of holiness that asks us to examine our own hearts? Where do we need to submit, be selfless, and surrender to the good of the community? Where do we need to look like servant Jesus? If peace in the community begins with me, where do I need to allow my heart to be transformed, that I might be a person of peace?

Peace does not come from the elimination of stress or conflict in my life; it comes as I, in Christ-like holiness, seek to reduce that conflict in our church, reminding us to be like

¹ Source: A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Simon & Brown, reprint 2018), p. 63

Christ toward each other. And this happens as we all accept, love, serve, and honor each other.

Mike Yaconelli in his book, *Messy Spirituality*, wrote of how individual believers are brought together in the body of Christ to create a magnificent work of art. It doesn't matter how insignificant you might think you are.

Moorhead, Minnesota, the home of Concordia College, lies across the state line from Fargo, North Dakota, a very bleak part of the country (especially during the winter). All year, the community anticipates Concordia's annual Christmas concert. Each December, a huge choir and a full orchestra give a musical performance in the concert hall at the college.

Every year, the people in the community create a unique background for the concert—a one-hundred-by-thirty-foot mosaic. Beginning in the summer, about six months before the concert, the community designs a new mosaic, rents an empty building, and the painting begins. Hundreds of people, from junior high schoolers to senior citizens, paint the mosaic. They paint by number on a large-scale design that has thousands of tiny pieces. Day after day, month after month, one little painted piece at a time, the picture on the mosaic gradually takes shape.

When everyone has finished painting, an artist goes over the entire creation, perfecting the final work of art. When the mosaic is completed, they place it behind the choir. It has the appearance of an enormous, beautiful stained-glass window.

Here's an example of it from one year.

Isn't it beautiful? The weekend of the concert, those people who helped paint arrive early, along with their friends and neighbors. Throughout the building, you can hear people whispering, "See that little green spot below the camel's foot? I painted it."

Every year in the middle of the summer in Moorhead, Minnesota, thousands of unknown, ordinary people paint a tiny insignificant tile. Six months later, the result is a spectacularly beautiful masterpiece. When each one does their part, it becomes this unified picture, that brings peace to all who see it. That is the church. A signpost to true peace for all the world to see. And in that way, as Paul said, "together with one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Communities—even communities of faith—are full of people with differing opinions. We have deep feelings about important issues. It would be easy for us to think or say that being quiet will bring peace, but Paul has laid out a different way for us. He speaks harsh words, but his words are ultimately a call to remember who we are. He didn't ignore the conflict; he waded right into it, and said, "Remember we are to be like Christ."

We live in days of seemingly extreme division, and it would be a mistake to ignore it. Instead, we need to ask, "If peace on earth begins with me, what do I need to change in my life to be a peacemaker?" If God has extended grace and mercy to us, where do we need to extend grace and mercy? This is a call to look at the person of Jesus and at who we are supposed to be in the world—people who are like Christ. So may we examine our hearts and do the hard work of walking through conflict with those who think differently, so that we might find a deep and wide community of faith, a community of peace, a community of Christ with one voice glorifying God.

Prayer

Pastor Jason, Benediction:

“May God who gives patience, steadiness, and encouragement help you to live in complete harmony with each other—each with the attitude of Christ toward the other. And then all of us can praise the Lord together with one voice, giving glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:5-6, tlb)