

A reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

[Romans 15: 1-13 Common English Bible (CEB)]

15 We who are powerful need to be patient with the weakness of those who don't have power, and not please ourselves. ² Each of us should please our neighbors for their good in order to build them up. ³ Christ didn't please himself, but, as it is written, The insults of those who insulted you fell on me. ⁴ Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus' attitude. ⁶ That way you can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice.

⁷ So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory. ⁸ I'm saying that Christ became a servant of those who are circumcised for the sake of God's truth, in order to confirm the promises given to the ancestors, ⁹ and so that the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

*Because of this I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and I will sing praises to your name.* ^[b]

¹⁰ And again, it says,

Rejoice, Gentiles, with his people. ^[c]

¹¹ And again,

*Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and all the people should sing his praises.* ^[d]

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

*There will be a root of Jesse,
who will also rise to rule the Gentiles.
The Gentiles will place their hope in him.* ^[e]

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Will you pray with me?

Lord, I ask that by your grace I may be a vessel for your truth and good news today; that you will speak through me and to your church, that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts here today may be pleasing to you. Amen

Today we're going to talk about communities... groups of people. In particular, we're going to talk about who gets to be in this group and who doesn't. Then we're going to talk about what scripture has to say about all this and what we are called to do as Christians.

To give us a snapshot of what I'm talking about, I want to share a story from the immortal wisdom of The Simpsons, a cartoon from the 90s about a love-able oaf named Homer and his family. In this episode I'm talking about, Homer is upset as he thinks back to when he was a child and wanted to join the treehouse club. In the story we see a group of kids eagerly climbing up the treehouse ladder, excited to be part of the group. There is another kid at the top of the ladder, who we realize is the club's bouncer. He's waving excitedly... "Hey Billy... Hey Joey! Come on in! There's plenty of room". Young Homer reaches the top when the bouncer says... "Sorry – not you Homer" "Why not?" The bouncer points to a sign, he doesn't even say anything. The sign says – "No Homers Club". Homer, indignant, says, "But you let in Homer Glubgut!" "It says no Homerrrrz. We're allowed to have one." And we hear young Homer's classic whine of defeat as he turns away.

Have you ever been Homer Simpson? So close to getting to be 'in' the group? Made it all the way to the door to be shut out? Have you been Billy and Joey? Invited in with open arms – even called by name and asked to join the party. Have you been the bouncer? Maybe not even realized it until later? In charge of who is in the community and who is out? In charge of enforcing the 'rules'.

What about that other character - Homer Glubgut? He's "in" the group by a technicality – yet part of a group that literally disavows his name? Walking on eggshells, waiting to be kicked out whenever they decide?

This story is all too familiar – we played out these characters in our own lives, rotating the roles. But as we heard in last week's sermon from David Johnson, God's got a different story. God's story involves him acting with grace and mercy by sending His Son - a prophet who welcomes all. And guess what – Paul says we've got to welcome everyone just like Jesus did.

Scripture does not shy away from this topic, as we are repeatedly given visions of what God's community looks like and what it doesn't look like. In fact, Paul's letter to the Roman church is all about a church who is dealing with who's "in" and who's "out". They are a mix of Jew and Gentile, in a time of significant anti-Jewish sentiment, and they are trying to come to some understanding of whether or not these two groups of people belong in the same club. They have tried to make each other the 'outcast'. Theologian NT Wright says that "Christian Gentiles and Christian Jews find themselves in uneasy coexistence." He describes the end of Paul's letter as saying, "The community that is created by this gospel must live as the true, renewed humanity, in its internal and eternal life. In particular, it must reflect God's intention that Jew and Gentile come together as one worshipping body in Christ."

Paul is saying – the debate is over church, everybody is welcome into the club. This gospel thing is to be given to everyone, and to be shared.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of welcoming the outcast is in the story we just heard about the Samaritan woman at the well. The gospel goes out of its way to give us the background. John 4:9 says, 9 The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" And then in parentheses: (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.) In other words, it was so important for you to know this that you don't need a book from seminary or an internet commentary to know that it is important that these two groups of people didn't get along. And yet, Jesus engages with her - Jesus engaged with this person anyways – one who is an outcast from Jewish community. Last week we heard about the woman with the alabaster box cleaning Jesus' feet

with her tears, she was an outcast too, and yet he welcomes her and he offers salvation to her. Jesus welcomes all – God is changing the story.

So – what good news does the gospel have for us today?

To answer that question, we must know where we stand. And in particular, where do we stand in the wake of violence? In Orlando where 49 children of God were murdered, primarily Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender persons of color. These precious people were targeted victims of hate because of their queer identity. We mourn and we lament the loss. But friends, the church cannot pretend this was a random act of violence or terrorism. Loving our neighbor – Jesus' commandment – starts with knowing their name. Loving our neighbor means we must stand up against homophobia – and church we aren't doing a good job of that. At best, we are afraid to talk about it. At worst, we are part of the community that creates a culture of fear and encourages hatred and oppression. Folks, we are the bouncers at the treehouse.

So, why is that a bad thing – why do we need this welcoming attitude that Paul keeps talking about? Why should we try and model Jesus' radical welcome to the fringes of society?

You see, Jesus gave a sacrifice to the community. Therefore, the community is obligated to respond not just in mutual love for Jesus as some type of individual act, this vertical relationship, but we love each other for the recognition and sacrifice of Jesus act for the other. Jesus death wasn't just for me to be saved by grace, but it was for me to recognize that act of love and sacrifice in you, the Jesus, the God-image in you, to be bound by this and to be bound to you as my brother and sister.

Love therefore is not some type of reaction to a tragic life event, or a sharing of common interests, but love, Christian love, is a binding that the Messiah died for the other person, too. If I have faith in that, then I must recognize and honor God's sacrifice in you and in all children of God. To cast someone to the edges, to push them to the fringes, to make life difficult for them, is to ignore God's sacrifice.

You see thinking of Jesus' sacrifice as to the community is significant. Paul here is talking about faith as a corporate experience – it is a community experience. We may focus so much on our individual faith and relationship with God, that we lose sight of the community. Paul's letter is offering a corporate faith where we build each other up. It's not me building you up, it's not you building me up, it's the entire community taking responsibility.

And in taking responsibility we worship God - not individually, not 1 hour on Sunday morning, but through an ongoing reflection of our lives and relationships. Friends, the work of the church is not just left up to the clergy – the work of the church is every day and we must all be constant, active participants. And I empower and encourage you to live fully into this call.

Welcoming each other, going out of our comfort zones, this is the way that the Kingdom of God is brought here on Earth; this is the way we glorify God together in harmony. THIS is the gospel's challenge in the wake of Orlando, in the wake of the anniversary of Charleston, in the wake of war and violence, in the wake of bigotry and hatred. We MUST welcome the outcast, the one we've put on the fringe of society. Because we are a kingdom people crying out for peace.

A recent story in the Washington Post covered a group of orthodox Jews who decided to go to a gay bar in solidarity with the Orlando victims. The rabbi said, “We just wanted to share the message that we were all in tremendous pain and that our lives were not going on as normal.”

The group was nervous about the encounter and nearly turned around. But they were open about their reason to be there, and because of that they were welcomed into the community. Instead of finding differences, they found common ground as they shared stories of connection. The bartender cut off the music and together, this group of unlikely people, got together as a community and they prayed, sang, and lit memorial candles.

So you may be saying, Daniel, that’s an odd story to choose. What does a bunch of orthodox Jews going into a gay bar have to do with us being Christian? Fair enough. Friends, it has everything to do with it. Let me remind you what Paul says - ²Each of us should please our neighbors for their good in order to build them up. ³Christ didn’t please himself, but, as it is written, The insults of those who insulted you fell on me.

Talk about welcoming the ‘other’, even to the point of ridicule? Engaging in uncomfortable spaces? Entering into relationship with people on the fringes, who have been discounted by society? This is what Paul is telling us to do in the passage. We are to welcome each other like Christ did – we are to build each other up.

Ok Daniel, I’m sort of with you, but who is on the fringe and how do we know? Let me give you some clarity. The further someone is away from you, the harder it is to see the Jesus in them. In other words, if you can’t recognize God’s sacrifice, God’s image in that person, or you find ways to justify pushing them further out, then they are OUT of your comfort zone, they are out of your treehouse. And it is as soon as they are out that things become dangerous, that hatred and fear are rampant. This is where oppression begins, where homophobia, and ageism, and sexism, classism, and racism can thrive. You see God knows this, and so we are encouraged to do the opposite – we are encouraged to welcome each other so that we can see the God-image in everyone.

Westbury, we are in a good place to follow God’s call to action – to welcome as Christ welcomed us. We are a unique church. You may often hear something like “Look around- this is what heaven looks like!” referencing our diversity of cultures and backgrounds. But sometimes we rest on our laurels, and don’t examine the deeper issues at hand. I was talking with a friend at a dialogue on racism. She mentioned the idea that our visible diversity sometimes leads to this false impression that somehow we here at Westbury are immune to racism. We’re not. Church, we must continue to talk about it, to engage with each other, to examine the ways we are a part of racism. We must examine this. We must also look at our other kinds of diversity. What about diversity of age? of background? What about Bernie, Hillary, and Trump supporters all sitting on the same pew? What about folks who don’t view the Bible the same way? What about folks who think differently from you? These are all reasons we use to justify pushing people out, pushing them to the fringes.

Friends I believe we must engage this, and lean into our “uneasy coexistence” as Paul encouraged the church in Rome to do. Westbury has hosted several conversations about racism, dialoguing with each other, and I believe these are critical to examining our community of faith. To that end, if you’d like to talk about more about this then I would to. I’d invite you to come talk to me. We’ll be hosting the next dialogue on racism and oppression at our house in the near future.

Welcoming the 'other' is not an easy task. Paul knows it's hard. God knows it's hard. That's why we see in verse 6 and 13, strong, significant references to hope. Paul's call to action here is a tough goal to meet and surely we will fail. He knows that the cost of discipleship is high. He knows that what he's asking for is a whole lot. He asks us to be patient, to build up our neighbor, even to the point of ridicule. Then later he calls us to this crazy, radical welcome – we are to welcome the way Christ welcomed us. Is that even possible? The divine welcoming us into the Kingdom of God? How do we do that for each other, is that even possible?

Well no . . . we can't do that, not alone anyways. But Paul tells us that our God is a God of hope. The ability to welcome the person on the fringes into our community is given to us through the Holy Spirit as we seek to create Christian relationship, it's given to us through the modeling of Jesus' life in how he welcomed others like the Samaritan woman, it's given to us in the faith that God will fulfill his covenant and will reconcile all peoples to Him.

See.. God equips us to do the work. Our communities, our church, MUST welcome the outcast with open arms. We must consistently build Christian relationships and welcome each other as Christ welcomed us. And it is through this that we will bring the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

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