

Receive One Another

Romans 15:1-13

Paul begins this chapter saying that the strong have an obligation to bear with the infirmities, the failings of the weak. But who is strong? Who is weak? And why is Paul so vague about these terms?

Well, maybe it's because, where it comes to disagreements, everyone tends to think they're right, right? I mean, don't we all tend to think we have the stronger position in any given argument? Don't we all tend to think we are the strong ones?

That was certainly the case where it came to the biggest division within the church of Paul's day – Jewish vs. Gentile Christians. And, according to what Paul has already taught us in this letter, each of them were in fact right about some things. Take the contentious issue of food, which was at the forefront of chapter 14. Given Paul's teaching, the Gentiles were right that the Jews were overly fussy about keeping kosher and avoiding certain kinds of meat. But at the same time, the Jews were right that there really wasn't anything to all those pagan rituals where meat was ceremonially offered up to idols. There was no good reason why Christians shouldn't buy and consume such meat, because it hadn't really been changed in any way.

In short, both groups could have seized on different points of Paul's letter to reinforce their own beliefs. Both groups could have considered themselves strong as they turned to the other group and said, "See? If you'd just think about things the way I do, if you would just get over your unreasonable scruples, everything would be fine, and we'd have no more quarrels."

And now all of this strange, first-century squabbling starts to sound familiar, doesn't it? No, we modern Christians don't get crossed up about questions of food. But over the last few weeks, we've noticed a host of issues that honest, earnest, Bible-believing Christians don't agree on, from bishops to baptism, from speaking in tongues to the musical instruments used in worship. And we know all too well that many other disagreements can spring up in a congregation, arguments that have nothing to do with the essential truths of the gospel. But in each of these disputes, don't we all have a tendency to think that we are right? Don't we all think that we are the ones who are strong in the Scriptures, and that everyone else is just misguided or ignorant?

So, how can we work through these honest differences of opinion over things that are not essential to the gospel? And as we continue to disagree, how can we avoid being disagreeable?

Paul's first main point is that whenever disagreements arise, we must not seek to please ourselves. In other words, we must not aim just to get our own way. And Paul points to Jesus as the clearest example of this sort of self-denial. After all, as the Son of God, He clearly could have had His way about anything He wanted, right? But He didn't come into this world for a vacation. No, He left the perfect palaces of Heaven, He entered this world of woe in order to suffer the reproach of men, as Paul reminds us in verse 3.

And whenever that reproach came His way, whenever he found Himself at the center of conflict, as He so often did, He consistently refused to take the easy way out. Because He insisted on standing up for the true interpretation of God's Law, the religious leaders of the day despised Him. And because He refused to focus on the things of this world, because refused to keep on feeding and healing all the

people and to use His miraculous power to lead a Jewish army against the Romans who occupied their land, the common people turned against Him as well. But in neither case was Jesus the least bit interested in popularity or pleasure. No, as contention swirled around Him, He stood His ground, regardless of what it cost Him.

And of course, Jesus also came into our world to experience the reproach of God – on our behalf. In laying down His life on the cross, suffering the punishment that all of us deserve, He became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God. In short, He didn't come into this world to please Himself, but to please us, to give us what we need.

And in verse 2, Paul is simply saying that we must do the same thing. We must seek our neighbors' good. We must seek to build others up. If we would truly be followers of Jesus, when disagreements arise the question for us must thus not be "What do I want," but "What do you want?" We must not ask, "What do I need," but "What do you need?"

And as Paul indicates in verse 4, when we demonstrate this sort of selflessness we are actually following the example of God speaking to us in the Scriptures. For Paul reminds us that everything written down in the Scriptures – everything that predicted what Jesus would do, even all those bloody sacrifices found in the Law of Moses – all that was written down for our good, to help us endure suffering, to comfort and encourage us. In short, God gave us His written Word for our good, and God gave us His Living Word in Jesus Christ for our good. So, if we want to be like God we must in the same way devote everything we say and do for the good of others.

Ah, but as we try to help others, it's so easy to maintain a safe emotional distance, isn't it? So that's why Paul tells us in verse 7 that we must step out of our comfort zones. We must not just serve others at arm's length – no we must receive each other, we must welcome our Christian brothers and sisters into our hearts and into our lives, in spite of all the ways that we think they are wrong. And why? Because that's the example Christ set for us. Indeed, He went much farther than this. For He didn't just welcome people who were essentially correct but had a few misunderstandings. He didn't come to redeem people who were basically in line with God's will, only having a few minor problems that needed fixing. Yes, I know that's the way we think of ourselves a lot of the time, as just needing a little touching up around the edges, but that's not an accurate picture of who we are.

No, when Christ received us, He received sinners. When Jesus gave up His life on the cross, He died in order to pardon people who were nothing more than rebels against His righteous rule. And since Christ brought sinners like us into His Kingdom, since Christ welcomed sinners who had no right to enter His presence, what reason could we possibly have to remain estranged from any brother or sister in Christ?

No, Paul makes it clear that as we seek to meet one another's needs we must stay in relationship with one another, in spite of our disagreements. And one way to do this is to wrestle through those disagreements so that, as he says in verse 5, we might be likeminded, so that we might be in harmony with one another according to Christ Jesus. And that, in turn, means giving up our typical Southern tendency to avoid conflict at all cost. No, when we Christians have earnest, honest disagreements with one another, we must do the hard work of Bible study together, seeking to understand how God speaks through the Scriptures to comfort and encourage all of us. Now, as we study, perhaps we'll be able to convince our brothers and sisters that we are right. Or perhaps we'll

come to the conclusion that they are right. Or perhaps we'll discover that we're both wrong and that we both need to change!

But we must not confuse our seeking to help one another see truth more clearly with a need for uniformity. After all, as Paul makes clear in today's passage, it was precisely because Jews and Gentiles were so different that Jesus' ministry was able to demonstrate more of the attributes of God. It was their differences that served to increase God's glory.

In verse 8, Paul reminds us that Jesus came into this world to minister to the Jews, to serve the Jewish people by keeping all the Law of God, including the law of circumcision, on behalf of all His people. He also lived a perfect, sinless life and died a sacrificial death in order to show how faithful God was to keep the promises He had made to Abraham and Moses and David, to demonstrate the truth of all the Old Testament Scriptures that point to Christ in so many ways.

But verses 9 through 12 show us that these same Scriptures also extended a promise to the Gentiles, to those other nations that hadn't received God's Law and who hadn't tried to obey God. And it was precisely because those Gentiles were so strange, so ignorant, so disobedient that Jesus was able to demonstrate not just God's truth, but also God's mercy towards them. By dying even for Gentiles, Jesus shows us that no one is too far away from God to receive His forgiveness, no one is too far gone to receive God's love.

In short, instead of despising one another for our differences over non-essential things, maybe we can learn to celebrate that diversity. Maybe the rich tapestry of God's Church, maybe the different ways Christians worship God all around the world serve to demonstrate more of God's glory than we Presbyterians can do by ourselves. And maybe God put people in this congregation who see things differently so that His glory might shine more brightly right here, where we are.

So what does all this mean for us in our everyday lives? Let's think again about some of those other Christians we might tend to judge, some of those other Christians we might tend to look down on, the way that Jews and Gentiles used to look down on one another. Let's think about those who worship in strange ways, or who disagree with us about nonessential matters. How can we help them see God's truth and faithfulness more clearly with our lips and with our lives? How can we show God's mercy to them in spite of our differences? And how might we let them demonstrate those things about God to us?

But why is all of this unity stuff so important, anyway? Well, look again at those quotes Paul draws out of the Old Testament, prophecies that said the Gentiles would come to know Jesus and thus come to know God the Father. What does God want all the Gentiles to do, along with all the rest of His people? God wants everyone to praise Him, to rejoice before Him, to sing to His name. God sent Jesus to draw a church to Himself from all over the world so that every corner of God's creation would once again be in a right relationship with Him, so that all those who have been made in God's image might devote ourselves completely to His glory, joining our hearts and voices not just on the day that Christ comes again to make all things new, but here and now. And to the extent that the Church can join together, praising our One Lord and King in spite of our differences, we demonstrate the reality of His kingdom on earth today.

So, let us seek to build up our Christian brothers and sisters, regardless of our differences with them. And let us receive them, let us welcome them as Christ has welcomed us, so that with one mind and one mouth we might all glorify God.