

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 859 5th St., Hancock, MN 56244
www.hancocklutheran.org
Pastor Gregg Bitter (320) 392-5313 - GreggBitter@gmail.com
Advent 2a
December 8, 2013

Christ Unites Us Romans 15:4-13

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The word from God through which the Holy Spirit strengthens our hope in Jesus is Romans 15

Everything that was previously written was written to teach us, so that through perseverance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of perseverance and encouragement give you the same way of thinking among each other that's in line with Christ Jesus, so that united in heart you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one voice.

Therefore keep welcoming each other, just as even Christ welcomed you for the glory of God. For I mean that Christ became a servant to the Jews for the sake of God's truth to confirm the promise made to the fathers, even that the Gentiles would glorify God because of his mercy, just as it is written:

"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles and sing psalms to your name."

And again it says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, along with his people."

And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples lift up their praises to him."

And again Isaiah says, "Here is the root of Jesse, the One who rises to rule the Gentiles. Their hope is in him."

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

This is the word of our Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Savior:

The movie ended with the family gathering around the Christmas table sharing laughter and good will. After the grudges and conflicts portrayed on the screen for the previous hour or two, everything resolved into reconciliation and unity. Any number of Christmas specials follow that story line.

Or consider the major world news event this past week. The death of Nelson Mandela brought back the news stories of how he worked for unity and reconciliation in South Africa after suffering years of apartheid. That's another heartwarming story of unity.

But dear Christian friends, there is no greater unity than what Christ brings. He unites us. That's the theme today.

But how different reality looks! Christians are divided into so many different denominations. Even within the same church body there's often distrust between the

local congregation and the leadership higher up. It can be the they're-not-going-tell-us-how-to-run-our-church kind of thinking. Even within a local congregation like ours where we have daily opportunities to express our Christian unity, how we fall short! Members complain about each other, especially if they think someone's not doing their job or not doing their fair share. Or criticism flows when someone doesn't do something as well as it should be done in our opinion. If criticism and complaining subside, it's often replaced with indifference or lukewarmness. We become so focused on our family, our friends, our work, our busyness, even our recreation, that our brothers and sisters in Christ become afterthoughts. How often do we pray for our fellow church members even when they're not sick?

But our sin-polluted reality does not nullify what Christ has accomplished. He unites us. How can we get our hearts more in tune with Christ's unity? That's the question we want to occupy ourselves with today. And the Holy Spirit instructs us about that through the word of God before us today.

The central verse around which the others pivot is verse 7. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you" (Romans 15:7 NIV11). The thought here is not merely tolerating someone, accepting that that's the way they are so we might as well put up with them. Rather, picture a hearty handshake or a big hug welcoming someone into your closest circle. Picture warmly welcoming guests to your family dinner table to celebrate together. That's the kind of acceptance here.

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you" (Romans 15:7 NIV11). Consider what you and I were without Christ. Earlier in this letter, Paul describes that. He writes, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12 NIV84).

Now what kind of acceptance did Christ show us when we were worthless? Paul also described that back in chapter 5. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8 NIV84).

Some of Jesus' parables vividly picture God welcoming us. Think back to the Thanksgiving Eve service. How did the Father welcome back the wayward son who humbly returned after remembering his Father's love? The Father ran out to him, threw his arms around him, kissed him. He welcomed him back as a full-fledged son, giving him the best robe, placing a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. They celebrated, butchering the fattened calf. (Luke 15:17-24)

Or think of the parable of the wedding banquet. When those who had been invited refused to come, whom did the king then invite? "Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Matthew 22:8-10 NIV84). All different kinds of people, even those who had lived bad lives were welcomed. But the one who thought his own clothes were good enough and

refused to wear the wedding clothes that the king provided -- he was thrown out into the darkness. (Matthew 22:1-14)

Christ welcomed you and me, dirty sinners that we were. He provided what we needed. He clothed you with his righteousness. He washed you clean with his blood. He died for you, dear friend, for you. Rejoice that Christ Jesus welcomes you.

And as that joy fills you and me, it overflows so that we accept one another. See your fellow Christian the way God looks at him or her. Faith covers the sinner with Jesus. See Jesus when you look at them. How would you treat Jesus?

Their personality may clash with yours. They may look different, talk differently, vote differently. They may have different tastes, different likes, different ways of doing things. Yet through faith we are family. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you" (Romans 15:7 NIV11).

Where do we find the endurance to persevere in doing this? Where do we find the encouragement to keep on accepting one another just as Christ has accepted us? How does Christ unite us? The answer is the same for each of those questions. Listen to what the Apostle writes, "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" (Romans 15:4-6 NIV11).

The Holy Bible, the Scriptures. That's what gives us the endurance to persevere and the encouragement so that we can and do accept one another even as Christ has accepted us. Through the Scriptures Christ unites us.

You see, dear friends, as we take the Scriptures to heart, they work in us "the same attitude of mind ... that Christ Jesus had" (Romans 15:5 NIV11). Don't lose sight of that. Many use the Bible to impose their own self-chosen mindset on others. That's sinful blasphemy. Sometimes those mindsets look quite accepting of others since they may let people do as they choose. But the acceptance that Jesus shows us takes us as we were and transforms us into what he wants us to be, the same attitude of mind he had.

Others approach the Bible as a rule book. But that exchanges our Savior for a law-giver. How lost that leaves us! Demanding that people follow a list of rules does not give endurance, encouragement, or true unity. Rules may appear to unite people on the surface, but underneath it there is not the same attitude as Christ Jesus had.

Still others simply use the Bible to derive the truths God reveals. This can certainly be useful. For God's true doctrine penetrates our hearts and mind. It confronts us with our sin and points us to our Savior. His truth works endurance and encouragement in us. His truth unites us by working in us the same attitude of mind that Christ Jesus had. But if we view the Bible only as a collection of passages to prove the true doctrine, faith stops being a living, breathing, powerful, busy, active trust and instead becomes only a systematic philosophy. That's a dead faith, even if that person can explain and defend all the teachings of the Bible.

The Scriptures were written for our continual learning. The Bible is not like math.

After you've mastered your addition tables, you don't need to go back to those flash cards and practice $1+1=2$, $1+2=3$... The Bible is different. We need to go back even to the passages we knew before we could add. For example, the account of Jesus' birth in Luke 2 is still well worth our time and effort to think about, even if you've been doing that for ninety years.

For you see, dear friends, the way the Bible gives us endurance and encouragement from God, the way the Bible brings us into true unity in harmony with the mind of Jesus Christ is this: the power of the Holy Spirit works in us as we take to heart the words of the Scriptures. This is so much more than reciting passages or explaining doctrines. Ponder what your Savior speaks and put it into practice. Chew on his words, savor them, relish them, inwardly digest them. Let his words flow through your eyes and ears into your mind, heart, spirit, and bones, and then out through your mouth and hands into your words and actions. That's why these words were written. That's how we are to use them.

How do our hearts become more in tune with Christ's unity, despite all the discord around us? As the music of the Scriptures sings within us, the Holy Spirit gives us the endurance and encouragement to accept each other just as Christ has accepted us. This takes longer than the length of a movie. It takes more than a lifetime. On earth we will never witness perfect unity. But when the family gathers at the heavenly feast, the eternal wedding banquet, then we will experience the unity of Christ in perfect harmony. Christ unites us. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.