“Welcome One Another,” Romans 15:1-13 (First Sunday after Pentecost, May 26, 2024)

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. **2**Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. **3**For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” **4**For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. **5**May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, **6**that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. **7**Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

**8**For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, **9**and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” **10**And again it is said, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” **11**And again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him. **12**And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.”

**13**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

PRAY

We’ve been studying the last part of the book of Romans (last five chapters) at Grace Bible Church, and this is the part of the book where Paul gets practical. He spends the first eleven chapters of Romans setting out this magisterial theology where explains who God is and his purposes in the world, but beginning in chapter twelve he applies it to the day-to-day lives of the Christians who lived in Rome in the middle part of the first century A.D.

The key verse of this section of Romans, the practical section, is 15:7, where Paul writes, “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” “Welcome one another” is perhaps the best summary of how God wants his people to live out the glorious truths of the gospel. Certainly, we at GBC should aspire to be a welcoming church.

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase “a welcoming church”? Maybe it’s greeters in the parking lot and at the front door, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee. I am so thankful for the people who work the parking lot and the volunteers who hand out bulletins and help people get seated each week. On busy Sundays during the school year our church would seem like an unfriendly place to a lot of guests because it can be so hard to find a parking place or a seat in this room, but thanks to our volunteers I don’t think many people feel that way.

But if that’s all “welcome one another” means, then we in the church are no different from any other service industry business: a hotel, a resort, a nice restaurant, because they also go out of their way to make sure there’s a place to park and a friendly face to greet you at the door.

But what does Paul mean by “a welcoming church”? The Greek word translated as “welcome” literally means “take to yourself.” In other words, be so open to another person that you make them your own, treat them with the kindness and consideration you’d show yourself. And even our English word “welcome” reflects this. Now, it’s just a greeting. “Hey, welcome, glad you’re here, come on in.” But originally it meant “a person whose coming is pleasing.” To welcome someone means you’re genuinely excited to see them, deeply thankful they are there.

Paul tells to be a welcoming church we must do two things: *first, we must bear one another.* *Second, we must live in harmony, powered by the gospel.*

First, we must bear one another. It’s easy to welcome people you like. It’s easy to welcome friends, people with whom you share a lot in common. C.S. Lewis talks about this in his book *The Four Loves.* You have friendship love. The Greek word for it is *phileo.* It’s why Philadelphia is the “city of brotherly love.” I have many friends in town whom I’m always glad to see. If they pull up in my driveway it’s a treat. It’s easy to welcome them.

It’s easy to welcome family members. That’s the love of affection. Of course, it’s easy to welcome someone with whom you’re in a romantic relationship. That’s erotic love.

But Paul’s not thinking about any of that when he writes about a “welcoming church.” He’s thinking about *agape* love. That’s disinterested love, and it’s the love that Christians are called to have for others. It’s the only kind of love you can have for those with whom you have no natural affinity.

And that’s the love that was needed in the Roman church. You had two groups of people there. On one side, you had Jews, people descended from Abraham and were God’s people in the old covenant. On the other side you had everyone else: Gentiles, the nations. Paul writes in verses 8-12 how the Gentiles in the new covenant are to also inherit the promises made to the Jews in the old covenant.

But these two groups in the Roman church had nothing in common. They weren’t family, they didn’t share a culture, they didn’t eat the same kind of food or dress alike, they didn’t share a first language, and many of them probably had never associated with someone in the other group before they joined the Roman church. Therefore, they desperately needed to develop the capacity to show *agape* love for one another.

We need the same thing, ***because we don’t want our church to turn into either a clique or a cult.*** A cult is where the members are brainwashed, and the leadership has total control. That’s not Grace Bible nor do I think there’s any immediate danger of us turning into a cult.

But I do think we could become a clique. It’s possible that Grace Bible Church can be made up of a critical mass of people who are so similar, have so many common interests and overlapping natural relationships that people on the outside of those interests will not be welcomed.

We don’t want that, but to prevent it we’re going to have to fight against the temptation just to settle in and hang around the people who are like us.

We’ve spent the last two Sundays talking about how Christians who disagree over matters of opinion should relate to one another. Our conclusion is aptly summed up in verse one, where Paul writes, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak [literally, “bear the failings of the weak,” there’s no “with”], and not to please ourselves.” Romans 15:1. The picture painted there is of on Christian putting another brother on his back and, despite all their differences, carrying him around.

I won’t go back over the territory we covered the past two weeks where we talked about “strong” and “weak” Christians, except to say that as Christians must bear burdens by bending over backwards to be considerate of those who hold different opinions on disputable matters, whether it’s politics, or how to raise children, or the question of alcohol, or any other issues Christians so often disagree on.

We’re going to go in a different direction this morning. In another book of the Bible, the book of Ephesians, Paul writes to the church at Ephesus these words: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2**with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love [and, like with Romans 15:1, literally it’s “bear one another in love”] …”. Ephesians 4:1-2.

There are other ways besides simply accommodating people who hold different opinions to bear other people, and if we’re going to be a welcoming church we need to improve in all these areas.

*First, we must bear differences in age.* I went back and looked and on Easter 2010 we had 200 people in attendance. This past year we had close to 600. Yes, the church has gotten bigger, and that explains part of the difference. But our church back then was more than half college students. So, on a holiday like Easter, when every other church’s attendance went up, ours would go down, because so many students would go home to see family.

I was 34 years old when became the pastor at Grace Bible, and even at that relatively young as I was one of the oldest members of the church. We may have had twenty people older than me, but that’s it.

We were basically all young back then, but that’s not the case today. We are from an age standpoint much more diverse than we were back then. Now I’m many years older yet there are far more people older than me in the church. And that’s great, we want that, but it does raise certain potential issues.

If you’re one of the older people in the church, you can get frustrated with the younger folks because of the music they prefer in worship, or because they are so fixated on children’s ministry and you’re just not worried about it anymore because you’ve moved on from that stage in life. Or you might simply think all these young people are naïve about the world or they seem a little too zealous for their own good.

And if you’re a younger person, you can find it easy to get frustrated with older people because they can seem so complacent that they’re lazy. You have good ideas for ministry and evangelism and serving our community, but you can’t get the older people to do anything.

Paul calls us to bear one another. How might we do that? For the older folks in the church (and I count myself as an older person) we need to realize the critique that we are complacent is often valid and be thankful that we have a church full of younger people with the energy and drive to do something for the Lord. And younger people need to realize that older people to have the wisdom that comes at least with life experience (and, hopefully, that comes with walking with God for decades) and you’d be foolish not to avail yourselves of it.

*Second, we must bear differences in income.* I think of all the differences in our town this is the one that has the most potential to trip us up. Differences in wealth is a greater barrier to fellowship than differences in ethnicity, and there’s a lot of research that backs this up. A white person and a black person who are well-off often get along more easily and naturally than two white people when one is wealthy, and the other is not.

One way for us to bear differences in income for each of to try to have a little less of what I’d call “house shame.” Some of us are embarrassed about the place we live because we think it’s not nice enough, or clean enough, so we don’t want to invite people over for a meal or a Bible study, and we can feel uncomfortable around people whom we think have more money. Others of us feel like we have to apologize for our homes because they are so grand. But Paul calls us in Romans 15 to get past that and welcome one another by spending time together, ideally in our homes.

*Third, we must bear differences in culture.* Because we are in a college town, we have people from all over the world in our church. That’s a huge blessing. But it can feel difficult to welcome someone from a different country. There are language differences, differences in proper etiquette. You fear offending the other person or you simply don’t like how uncomfortable it can feel to talk to someone when it’s not easy to understand them, and so the temptation is to play it safe and avoid interacting to people you don’t know altogether. We can’t let that happen if we want to be a welcoming church.

None of this is easy. Some of it will be harder than others. So, what do we do? Paul tells us in Romans 15:2-3. “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. **3**For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’”

What’s a reproach? It’s an expression of displeasure. It’s someone coming up to you and saying, “You’re not good enough. You need to do more, or do better.” In some contexts, a reproach is an insult. That’s how the old NIV translates verse 3: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

When we don’t want to welcome people with whom we have differences, it’s often because we are afraid that we will be reproached. We’ll say the wrong thing to this person from another culture and offend them. We won’t be viewed as an equal by this person who has more money than me. We’ll reach out to a younger person and ask them to go to coffee to get to know them better and then they’ll look at us as if we have early-onset dementia. We don’t want to welcome people because we fear we will be rejected.

But in those moments Paul tells us to remember Jesus. You can’t be rejected in any ultimate sense, because Jesus Christ was rejected for you.

He experienced the ultimate reproach. Not only did he receive the insults of all those who were crucifying him, but on the cross he was rejected by God himself. Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” You could translate that as “My God, why have you rejected me?” Jesus was cut off and took the ultimate reproach from God. He was cast out of the kingdom of God to pay for our sins so that we could be brought in.

Yes, you may feel uncomfortable if you try to welcome people and bear their differences, and you’ll probably make some mistakes. ***But no harm will come to you because the reproaches of those who reproach you fell on Jesus.***  Look at what Jesus did for you. See how by his life and death he opened his arms to you and welcomed you into his kingdom, by sheer grace. As one of my favorite passages on the gospel puts it (Isaiah 55:1-2): “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. 2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.” See what Jesus has done for you, then out of joy welcome one another.

Second, then we can live in harmony, thanks to the gospel. “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, **6**that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 15:5-6. Paul tells us that once we take the gospel deep down into our hearts, we will not want to let our differences keep us from welcoming one another.

How so? *First, the gospel keeps our differences from making us feel superior.* Before the gospel takes root in our hearts, ***our differences are what make us feel better about ourselves***. We get into comparison mode, thankful that we are better than other people at certain things.

We say, “I have done well in school, I’m smarter than those people.” Or “I’ve raised a great family. All my kids are fine, but their kids have all these problems. I’ve got to be wiser than those people.” Or “I am a moral person and I believe the Bible. Certainly, I’m more righteous than some people I could name.”

Those differences do bring a sort of joy, because we can say, “Look what I’ve achieved, look what I’ve done!” You get a little dopamine hit when you come out favorably in these comparisons.

***But it’s a joy that automatically makes you feel superior to other people.*** Your differences don’t just make you feel better about yourself, but they make you look down your nose at others.

This is the reason why Jesus Christ was able to create a community, an ability to welcome others, the world had never seen before. Because if the new joy you get is a joy over being saved by grace, if the joy is, “I was lost and have been saved by sheer grace and now I’m completely loved and valued,” that’s a joy that can’t make you feel superior to the people outside. That kind of joy creates harmony. In the gospel, differences are no longer things that make you feel superior to others, but they serve to make other people interesting, broaden our horizons, and increase our capacity for empathy and understanding.

*Second, the gospel knits people together in a way no other power in the universe can.* That’s why the apostle Peter can write in 1 Peter 2:4-5, “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, **5**you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Paul says something very similar about Christians being stones together in a temple in Ephesians 2.

Where do Paul and Peter get that idea? Years ago, I heard a Tim Keller talk about this. He pointed out that if you go back to 1 Kings 6, you’ll learn something about how Solomon’s temple, the temple of God in the old covenant, was built. At the quarry, the masons worked very hard on the blocks that formed the temple. They took stones and they chiseled those stones to match precise dimensions. So perfectly were they hewn out of the quarry that when they were brought to the building site, the temple went up in silence. There were no hammers, nor were there chisels, because at the quarry they had been so perfectly formed that they slid perfectly in the place.

This is Paul’s way of saying if you, through an experience of grace, have been to the quarry of Jesus Christ, then when you meet another Christian, you fit. There’s a bond. It doesn’t matter your age. It doesn’t matter how much money you have. It doesn’t matter what country you come from. It doesn’t matter your education. ***In Jesus Christ, you fit.***

I am a middle-aged white guy from America. But if you put me in a room with a 26-year-old woman mother of three from Pakistan, even if we don’t speak the same language, give us a translator and an hour to talk about Jesus and ***we will know that bond.***

That’s how it works if you’re a Christian, ***but maybe you don’t know that***. You say, “Well, I think I’m a Christian, but I don’t feel that way because when I see these people, these people who have money and they say they’re Christians, or these people of other races who say it, I don’t feel like that.”

Then maybe you haven’t been to the quarry. ***Maybe you’re a cultural Christian.*** Maybe you haven’t experienced the grace of Jesus, because in him you should think, “I’m a Christian first, and rich or middle class or poor second.” “I’m a Christian first, and I’m from Africa, or India, or Germany, or Mississippi second.”

When you meet somebody else who’s been through that same transformative experience of the gospel, and you meet someone different, someone who is the kind of person who all your life you’ve been told by people like you not to trust … when you, a Christian, find another Christian from another tribe, so to speak, all those differences are insignificant compared to what’s happened to you both in Jesus because now they are your brother or sister in Christ.

In closing, I want to make two applications. If we are going to bear our differences and build harmony in the church, we’ll need to do two things. *First, it takes involvement.*  You can’t glorify God with one voice with other Christians unless you are around other Christians in the first place. You must be involved in the local church.

I’m not necessarily talking about formal membership in a local church, though I encourage it, I think it’s a good idea for all Christians, and if you want to learn more about it, we have a membership class coming up in July you can attend.

I’m just talking about finding ways to be around other Christians. Are you finding ways to study the Bible with other believers, pray and sing with them, serve with them, or just hang out with them and encourage one another? Whether it’s a Sunday morning service, or a Wednesday night prayer meeting, or a small group, or just inviting friends over and sharing a meal, you won’t live in this kind of harmony unless you are first around other Christians to do so.

You must be intentional about this; it won’t happen naturally. When because of modern technology there are inside of every single house and apartment and dorm room and indeed in our own pockets entertainment possibilities that would have humbled a medieval king, you must work to be around other Christians.

But a willingness to be involved, while great and necessary, isn’t enough. *Second, this harmony takes commitment.* Most Christians in the United States and certainly in the South are, no question, far too individualistic in how they view the Christian life. We’ve come to the church thinking very little about harmony with other believers but instead thinking about what will most benefit us, and we tend to think of the church as a spiritual cafeteria where we can get all our needs met.

So, this is what happens: we say, “I go to this church because I like the music, and I go to this Bible study because I really like the group leader, and my kids go to this church because of the youth group, and then I listen to this pastor on the internet because I like his sermons.”

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that you must only participate in the activities of only one church. *But when there’s no commitment whatsoever to other Christians, it’s really hard to bear with one another and build harmony.* Without commitment, without skin in the game, it will be too easy to cut and run when things get uncomfortable (and they will get uncomfortable).

But always remember that you’ll never be more uncomfortable for the sake of others than Jesus was for your sake. So, friends I urge you to do the hard work of welcoming one another. It’s more than worth it. Nothing displays the gospel more to a watching world than when God’s very different and diverse people welcome one another in love. AMEN