

With One Voice

Isaiah 11:1-9
Romans 15:1-6

We just read from the concluding section of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. As he often did at the end of his letters, here he gives his readers a list of practical instructions. These usually had no connection, no theme. Just things like "give so and so a brotherly hug from me," and, "make sure you house the widows and orphans among you," and, "don't argue about what kinds of food you can eat." The German biblical scholars of the 19th century called these concluding sections "keuchentischen", or kitchen tables, because the kitchen table is where we put all kinds of things that we do not know where else to put them.

In our six verses Paul urges his readers to "put up with the failings of the weak". In the church, "we who are strong" must "build up our neighbor." He throws in a one verse theological statement that Christ accepted the insults we deserve. Jesus put up with our failings and by so doing built us up. He extols the value of the scriptures, which for them would have been our Old Testament. He lifts up the value of living in harmony and hopes that the church might praise God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ with one voice. On second thought, this particular keuchentisch does have a theme: unity in the church. Throughout this paragraph we find Paul coming at the importance of harmony from different angles. This was one of the more common

topics in his letters. Because without unity the church loses effectiveness in mission. Its fellowship gets damaged. And its worship loses its spiritual power.

Let us do a little math story problem. How many distinct pairings can you form in a church with one hundred people? In other words, how many different twosomes can you form? The answer is 5,756. There is no way that every single one of those combinations will experience harmony. *Somebody* will not like somebody else. As he traveled and visited churches, the Apostle Paul heard about conflict *all the time*. He wrote about it *all the time*. He wrote criticisms of specific conflicts and he wrote—as here in Romans 15—positive exhortations to live in peace in the church. Linda and I have served among you for four and a quarter years. By now I know of some conflicts here. I know also of folks who do not care for me. This always happens everywhere in the church. I can live with it by now; I've been doing this for thirty-seven years. In fact, it is not hard. Certainly not in a congregation as generally harmonious as Central Presbyterian. Still, lifting up Paul's exhortation to live in peace is never out of order.

Paul did also urge his readers to honor their scriptures. Let us turn now to one with which he would have had great familiarity: Isaiah 11. As we said last week, the first 40 chapters in Isaiah consist primarily of prophecies of the coming apocalyptic Day of Judgment that God will surely visit upon the people. But sprinkled throughout we find lovely, poetic visions of the Messiah, who will follow that judgment by bringing the realm of God to earth. A new age of peace, justice and prosperity would begin. Today we read one of these brighter prophecies.

New growth will appear on the presumably dead “stump of Jessie”. Jessie was the father of King David. This new growth will come from David's family. (This prophecy about the “house and lineage of David” gets echoed in Jeremiah, Zechariah and Luke.) The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon this Messiah, giving him great wisdom and knowledge. With righteousness he will advocate for the poor and meek. His realm will be so peaceful that wild animals, normally mortal enemies, will “lie down together”. And a little child shall lead them. Christians reading this prophecy immediately connected it with the birth of the Christ child. This vision concludes, “They will neither hurt nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” That “holy mountain” part refers specifically to Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, but scholars generally take it also as a reference to all of creation. A child will appear. He will usher in a new age of peace and harmony. All creation, all peoples, will know the Lord.

Christmas is exactly three weeks away. Christmas is the day assigned as the mass, or feast, celebrating the birth of that little child. We do not know on what day he was actually born; nor even in what year. It does not matter. What *does* matter is that we need to follow our leader. The leader who would grow up to say, “Peace I leave you, *my* peace. I do not give as the world gives.” He gives without restriction or hesitation. He gives permanently. He made it abundantly clear that he desires that we live in a fellowship with each other that resembles the fellowship he entered into with us. A fellowship characterized by harmony.

At the joint meeting of the session and deacons in 2019 I asked the church officers to identify Central Presbyterian's core values. All four values we identified address the importance of keeping the peace in the church. Those core values are:

- We encourage each other to live as disciples of Jesus Christ
- We make decisions in a respectful, collegial way
- We love and support each other
- We exercise theological forbearance, meaning we respect differences in belief

I can think of only one significant episode in our time here at Central when we did not live up to our values. And even that one has not appeared to cause lasting scars. So, well done, church! Let's keep it up! We worship the God who *is* love. We serve the God who calls upon us to unite our efforts to minister to the poor and meek. We fellowship in the name of the God who has promised eternal, profound peace. As we wait for that consummation, let us not grow weary of encouraging each other, of respecting one another, of loving and supporting each other, of respecting differences in belief. As we wait for the Prince of Peace let us make peace: peace in the church and peace in our outreach ministry to our community and to all creation

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