

Sermon

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Welcome Transforms Alienating Disputes

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Romans 14:1. Paul implies that a quarrel inhibits welcome. In 15:7 Paul grounds his challenge in the Christ event. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. A Christ inspired welcome is an antidote to alienation fueled by disagreement. Welcome transforms alienating disputes.

As I worked on this message I happened across a Blondie and Dagwood cartoon. In their dialogue each admits that they could not recall what their recent argument was about. Both wished they could remember. In the last frame a smirking Dagwood declares, we really did have a good one going. Arguments- energetic conversations about conflicting opinions, can be playful, necessary, difficult, clarifying, and invigorating. The Romans text helps us avoid painful and destructive interchanges about faith that require healing and recovery.

In a thought experiment that I began in early 2014 I explored the message and value of Romans 14-15:7 to an issue being addressed by Mennonite Church Canada, covenanted same gender relationships, same gender lifelong coupling blessed by the Church. I wanted to see if I could convince myself of the relevance of this text to this issue. (My thought experiment, on which this message draws, is part of this same web page.)

Two questions shaped my exploration of this text: Can we justify its application to the current dispute about covenanted same gender relationships? If the answer is “yes”, or a tentative “yes,” or even an uncertain “no”, the second question of greater significance follows: what are we to learn?

Does Romans 14-15:7 fit our current situation? A very brief reference to two statements Paul makes invites this exploration.

First, in 14:14 Paul writes, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.” Two passages addressing the issue of cleanliness must come into view. In Acts 10 God instructed Peter to eat prohibited unclean food. He understood this message given in a trance as God’s instruction to extend the gospel of Jesus Christ to the gentile Cornelius. The gospel is for gentiles not only for Jews observant of the purity codes. The codes provided instructions to the Israelites to secure their place in the community and in temple worship. Peter’s episode led to changes in the way the early church read the purity codes in Leviticus. In this long, complex and wide ranging list is the prohibition against what is interpreted to be same gender sexual relations. A necessary but difficult to construct case can be made about the relevance of inclusion of covenanted same gender relations in this unclean list.

Paul’s second statement is in 14:6; “...those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord since they give thanks to God and those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.” This text expresses the central theme of Romans 14-15: If a thoughtful, faithful and dedicated follower of Jesus Christ holds opinions we don’t agree with we are obliged to welcome that person as a faithful fellow pilgrim. We may not use divergent views to undo the bond Christ creates. The remainder of this message elaborates on this basic theme.

From my perspective both sides, those for and those against covenanted same gender relationships, when doing Biblical interpretation, provide articulate and thoughtful but not compelling answers. Those wanting to change the church’s position have an interpretive hill to climb. Those who resist this change face the

challenge of shaping a compassion that makes sense in the current context. All of us have partial answers and many remaining questions. What I do find compelling is the apostle’s instruction to deeply committed followers of Jesus Christ who do not agree with each other. Welcome one another but not for the purpose of quarreling.

Paul writes this letter in the middle of the first century to introduce himself to the followers of Jesus in Rome. In chapters 14-15 he applies the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the heart of his letter to an internal matter in that congregation, what he calls “quarrels.” He outlines how living the gospel of Jesus Christ overcomes what I call alienating disputes. This section of his letter is not an afterthought. It is central to his understanding of the impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The disputed opinions in the church in Rome appear in 14:2 “some believe in eating anything and others eat only vegetables,” and in 14:5 “some judge one day better than another and others judge all days alike.” Disagreement over food to eat and holy day observance. By mid-first century this church included folks from many backgrounds: Jews, Greeks, Romans, and other ethnic groups. What a mixture of thought about what was proper and acceptable! Descendants of Abraham and Sarah had distinct rules about food to fulfill their duty to God. No pork, no ostrich, no weasel, and many other animal food sources. In addition was the question of the origin of the meat. An easy source was the local butcher shop associated with the temple where the citizens worshiped the city’s god or goddess. The worshiper brought the animal as a worship sacrifice. Temple custodians sold meat from that sacrifice to support the temple.

Could a Christian Jew, or a Christian gentile, eat such ritually contaminated meat? Some thought not and others like Paul thought yes.

We easily dismiss this text. Why get exercised over such food fights, such trivial matters? Note that these issues led folks in Rome to strong and divergent views with dramatic divisive consequences. These followers of Jesus could walk away from each other. That threat was great enough that Paul needed to address it. We may not ignore this text because we think it deals with ancient irrelevant disagreements.

Let us in our imagination visit a Roman house church on a holy day. The worship service is over and people begin to prepare for the shared meal. Isaac and Rebecca leave. They do not want to have to deal with the question of food. There was sure to be talk and they would feel cornered. Solomon and Hannah stay but are uneasy. They are suspicious that the food is not ritually clean. They decide to ask and some members of the group impatiently roll their eyes.

Can this group enjoy their time together? How do you create a climate of happy enjoyment of each other when such tensions over deep convictions are present? Welcome suggests relaxed content interchange. Given the context is that even possible?

I use the following image to describe welcome. These people stand in a circle relaxed and appreciative of their belonging. They hold hands happily. Or do they? Might there be some tense moving about as folks decide whose hands they can hold. Add to this image - Jesus Christ helps participants hold the hands of their neighbours, particularly the folks with divergent views about food. Might the Lord have some difficulty assisting in this hand clasp as he

deals with reluctance, resistance, refusal, insensitive exuberance?

What has to happen inside each person and in the group for this expansive welcome to occur?

I identify two Pauline instructions.

First, monitor your attitudes and words; let's intensify it - scrutinize your attitudes and words.

14:3 "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat." Those who are flexible about their choices will be inclined to disdain. Those who are carefully observant in their choices will be inclined to judge. Some words and associated attitudes inflame disputes: despising, putting down, ignoring, considering immature; judging, putting away, dismissing, rejecting.

Neither despising nor judging is acceptable. It is okay to disagree but not to put down or put away. And why avoid these acts? Because Christ has welcomed you. Do to others as Christ has done to you.

Words convey ideas, and expose attitudes. The latter are also shown by tone of voice, volume, facial expressions. We do not know what words of disdain or judgment Roman Christians used. Let's go to some of today's potentially offending words: Fundamentalist, Liberal, Conservative, Socialist, Capitalist, Communist. These are not only descriptive of a system of thought, or identify people who hold these views. These words can become labels. When used in the midst of disagreements they too readily become freighted with actions and attitudes – disdaining, rejecting.

Look at Paul's concepts of weak and strong in faith. The weak he says are those who

cannot eat what others enjoy. The strong are those who enjoy what others avoid. The people he calls weak in faith might protest. "We are not weak in faith, we stand against the misguided folly of those you call strong." Words identify positions and expose attitudes.

In our interchanges about covenanted same gender relations we cannot use the words Paul employs, weak and strong. It is unclear who to identify as strong or weak. Any attempt to do so delays the careful work of welcome required of everyone. It takes away energy from doing the welcome and it shifts obligation for that activity to others.

Now I venture into another verbal minefield. There are two words that appear at times in the contemporary interchanges on the subject at hand that need careful examination; one is "deviant" and the other is "homophobic." Descriptions they are, and they may even be useful and correct identifiers but in contemporary use they are easily loaded and often are with the freight of disdain or judgment.

Paul is onto a significant human tendency. When we hear something we disagree with we will tend to either disdain or judge, either put down or put away. And we similarly will hear others who disagree with us put us down or put us away when they question us.

The first task Paul identified, monitor your attitudes and words, Christ's relationship to you being the guide.

The second instruction this text places before us is this: practice mutual regard.

Four statements Paul makes get at this task. I see these as a summary of his longer and complicated exposition.

14:5b "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds."

4:23 "But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, for whatever does not proceed from faith (conviction in the footnote) is sin."

We must take care of our own faith, our convictions, stay true to what God has implanted within.

14:19 "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." Note, mutual upbuilding.

This statement focuses on our obligation to each other. Our duty is to ensure that we can all live the convictions we treasure without hindrance, assisting each other to faithfulness to our individual convictions. Help someone hold to a conviction we find unacceptable? Really?! How is that to be done?

14:22 "The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God."

Which I take to mean – do not make it your mission to change someone else's mind. Share your faith but not for the purpose of getting agreement.

Can Paul's instructions encourage us to practice welcome? Given the complexity of human relationships will they enlist us in choosing welcome? Two overly brief responses – one practical and the other interpretive.

First the practical one. Is it really possible to bring into being relationships and communal structures that keep differences from creating alienating distance? For example, can a conference of congregations or a denomination live out the Pauline welcome where divergent attitudes and practices

coexist? One pastor officiates a ceremony for same gender coupling while another refuses? Or a congregation approves such ceremonial activity but the pastor will not perform one. I wonder if a community can develop rituals, procedures, policies so that differences do not alienate. It will take a lot of hard practical work to live this welcome.

Now the interpretive difficulty with these texts. They are open to these questionable claims: whatever I think is true is true and I may do whatever I decide; whatever I consider right is right and nobody may restrict my activities; whatever I know to be worthwhile is worthwhile and I may do what I enjoy; and whatever I believe to be beneficial is beneficial and I may pursue my values as I will. Clearly such personalized views have limits. John Toews in his Believers Church commentary on this Romans text says that Christians can have a variety of divergent views on many things as long as they put Christ in the centre. That helps some. Note that John did not say all things. So the question remains; what is an acceptable optional belief and how do we decide? My reading of Romans is perhaps articulate and hopefully thoughtful but is certainly not finally compelling for everyone because of continuing problems interpreting and applying these verses. Others will read these texts differently or refuse to apply them to the issue at hand. But that certain fact does not free us from seeking ways to practice this remarkable virtue, welcome.

Paul's instructions are not foreign to us. We frequently live them selectively – each fully convinced of our individual convictions and mutually upbuilding each other in our differences. I note two settings of many that hint at the times when we do what Paul requires. These are limited portrayals of what he calls for but show that we know how to do it to achieve selected goals. In inter

Mennonite settings such as MCC in peace, relief and development work various Mennonite groups avoid arguments about other matters we do not agree on: the clothes we wear, the meaning of communion, the practice of church discipline, the vehicles we drive. And there are numerous ecumenical settings. When I became pastor of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church in 1962, I inherited a practice that was really new for me, stretched me. The three churches in the village of St. Jacobs, Mennonite, Lutheran, and Evangelical United Brethren (later in the decade United Church), joined in an annual Easter Sunrise service. Around 1970 these three congregations added a communion service. We did not get into conflicting talk about our very real differences. Yes we remained separate structurally but at least in this Easter sunrise service there was a hint of what Paul calls for.

My reading of this text pulled to the forefront two themes. First, I note the divisive nature of the conflicting opinions in the Church in Rome about food and holy day observance. The collapse of the intercultural church was a real possibility. Followers of Jesus could walk away from each other, angrily with a sense of betrayal, or sorrowfully because of the loss of a desired vision, or disheartened because of failure to maintain belonging, but nevertheless walk away. That awareness intensifies my second impression about this text: Paul calls for welcome in the face of a divisive dispute. It is this call to welcome because of Christ which really impresses me. Do to others as Christ has done to you. Has Christ walked away from you? When I practice welcome in the Pauline sense it changes the way I respond to someone who strenuously disagrees with me or does what I cannot.

I bring this reflection to its close by imagining three clusters of responses to this reading of Romans. This is also the occasion to provide a summary of what we can learn from Romans 14-15.

The first cluster: believers who hold that covenanted same gender relations are clearly a violation of God's will for humanity and may not be permitted in the company of the faithful. They will see this reading of Romans as a sell out to a society that has lost its moral foundation. Please note, this reading of this text does not call for their agreement with covenanted same gender relationships. No one may push them to change their minds. What this text calls for is that they welcome followers of Jesus who accept that way of life. Paul undoes guilt by association. We are not made guilty for someone else's convictions when we welcome.

The second cluster: believers who fervently press for acceptance of people who support or live in covenanted same gender relations. They will rejoice in this call to extend welcome. However, they will likely find this reading of Romans inadequate because it does not demand a change of mind in those who cannot accept such relationships. Again please note that this reading of this text calls this second cluster to welcome those who cannot in good conviction accept that view without trying to change their views. Again, Paul undoes guilt by association in welcome.

The third cluster: these believers too have a hurdle to overcome. They like this reading of Romans. What a relief to have instructions to avoid alienating disputes! However, welcome remains a real challenge. Welcoming those who are animated in their conviction remains a dramatic task not easily lived out. And it may be this cluster's task to encourage the

structuring of welcome when we talk about a subject we do not agree on.

Welcome must precede talking. That is a task all three clusters of respondents share.

Numerous images of how this text impacts us have come to me during this last year. I share only four. This text is like: twin lightning strikes - twice Paul calls for welcome, startling; this text is like: an earth quake that shakes foundations, unsettling; this text is like: a hard to swallow medicine that heals us, gulp. And the one I end with. I see this image on TV when I watch the end of a football game. In celebration the victorious players pour a tub of cold drink over their coach who reacts with a shocked shiver, a laugh, and triumphant hugs. Warm water soothes. Boiling water injures. Cold water gets our attention. Here comes the bucket. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. Wow!

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