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August 21, 2005

Romans 12:1-18

Can't We All Just Get Along?

How many of you were here at church last Sunday? Most everyone, I think. In many ways our worship was like an old-time revival meeting. We sang the "old" hymns from the Baptist Hymnal. Two of our members, Stephanie Cole and Lee Tetlow shared with us how their lives had been impacted by meeting the resurrected Jesus. The only thing missing was a covered dish dinner afterward!

Seriously, though, I am encouraged when people share their faith journeys. I appreciate finding common threads between other peoples' struggles and successes, and my own journey. I often learn that the needs and desires and longings of people of faith are more similar than not. Even though each of us may have our own perspective about our lives and our own ways of meeting challenges, we tend to experience God's love and grace and acceptance similarly during tumultuous times in our lives.

That's one reason why I am often taken by surprise when members of a church find themselves embattled with each other. "How naïve, Jane." "How naïve!" I can almost hear many of you say it. In fact, go ahead. Be my guest. Let me explain what I mean by first telling you what I DO NOT mean. I am NOT saying that we who call ourselves followers of Jesus must always agree with each other. I am not saying that we even have to think of each other as buddies, though in a church like Wedgewood where we get to know each other fairly quickly and deeply, friendships grow more rapidly than in churches where people worship anonymously with 900 of their closest friends each week. What I AM SAYING is that if we are to take Paul seriously, our ACTIONS toward each other must be the way by which we worship!

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The scripture we have heard read this morning, beginning with our responsive call to worship, is part of a powerful exhortation by the apostle Paul to the church at Rome to be the body of Christ – the Christians – that they were called to be.

Today's scripture is part of Paul's ethical teachings for the Roman church. If members of the church at Rome intended to follow the way of Jesus, they must keep certain practices in everyday life.

Look again in your bulletins at the first two verses that I rephrased a little for our call to worship. We are told that we are to present ourselves – our very bodies – as a living sacrifice to

God. That presentation of our whole selves is our worship. A German New Testament scholar stated more than 80 years ago that “Christian worship does not consist of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts. It is the offering of bodily existence in the otherwise profane sphere...this takes place in daily life...” (repeat) (A. Schlatter as quoted by Ernst Kasemann in Commentary on Romans, p. 329). “Christian worship does not consist of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts. It is the offering of bodily existence in the otherwise profane sphere...this takes place in daily life...”

Let me attempt to paraphrase that profound thought into 21st century American English: Christian worship is not what happens between 11:00 a.m. and noon on Sundays at 4800 Wedgewood Drive. Christian worship is how we choose to live our lives 24 hours a day/7 days a week among those we love and those who it is hard for us to love.

And is that acceptance for everyone sacrificial love? You BET it is! How much easier it is to flip off the person who cut in front of you on your way to work – yes, Christians do occasionally “flip off” erratic drivers – than to wish that offensive person “godspeed.” How tempted we might be to label someone who insists that the trim on our building be painted brown – or red – or blue – or green as being tasteless at best and uncooperative at worst! Sometimes those judgmental thoughts become actions. You may find this a remote example, but I know a story of people who left a church in upstate New York because they disagreed with the color choice for the new sanctuary carpet. Of course that was only the surface reason... But I digress...

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When I officiate at weddings, couples sometimes choose verses 9 – 18 of Romans 12 to be read. Listen again to these words. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor...Bless those who persecute you...Live in harmony with one another...Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

These words, written by Paul to the Christians in Rome, clearly give us instructions about how we are to treat fellow Christians and they apply as well to our relationships with our spouses, partners and other family members.

First of all, we who call ourselves Christians love one God and have committed ourselves to following the example of Jesus who taught us to love one another. Second, we belong to the body of Christ – an organism alive with promises of new life. That although we may see things differently, we are all part of the same living, breathing body: the body of Christ.

The apostle Paul reminds the Christian community at Rome that just like a human body, the body of Christ has many different members and not all the members are the same, but nonetheless, all have important roles to play in the life of the body of Christ.

In I Corinthians 12 Paul speaks at length about how the body of Christ cannot get along without each member of it. “IF the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (I Cor. 12:12-26) In fact, Paul declares that if one member of Christ’s body suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

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Can’t we all just get along? First made famous by the now-infamous Rodney King during the 1992 Los Angeles riots – this question came to me almost immediately after I read this scripture from the 12th chapter of Romans. King’s 1991 beating at the hands of the Los Angeles police sparked his plaintive plea, which was almost a rhetorical question for which there was no answer. Can’t we all just get along?

Those involved in the beating, and Rodney King who was beaten up, stood for two very different kinds of citizens of Los Angeles. King was being chased for allegedly breaking the law. The officers who pulled him from his car were passionate in their attempts to subdue him. They represented opposite sides of the law. We in the church seek to be faithful to God’s call in our lives. We all love and try to follow a Jesus who gave his life because he loved us. We are part of the body of Christ. Why, then, would we want anything less than to be at peace with each other?

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Like a few others of us, I grew up in a fundamentalist church that preached what I call the “prohibitions of the faith.” Don’t wear makeup. Don’t go to dances. Don’t drink. Don’t, don’t, don’t if you want to get to heaven. I did my best to comply all through my elementary school and teenage years. I even played softball in a skirt at church camp because we were not allowed to wear jeans or shorts on the conference grounds. Can’t you just imagine it? (Smile!)

But just about 2 months before my senior year, I had my hair professionally lightened so that I might look “prettier” for my senior pictures. Imagine my shock when I went to church for the first time and many older women confronted me: “Did your mother know what you were doing?” “If God had wanted your hair to be blond, he would have given you blond hair!” When I look back, I can laugh now, but I still wonder how such faithful Christians could be so judgmental of such an innocent act.

Why, then, would we want anything less than to be at peace with each other?

Perhaps because it is easier to ignore someone we don’t like much or someone with whom we are angry, easier than attempting to reconcile with that Christian. After all, reconciliation means taking a risk – opening ourselves to the possibility of being hurt. And sometimes we are just not up to the task. Sometimes our own experiences of being discriminated against by other Christians, of being ignored or put down, especially in other churches, interfere with our ability to risk.

But I believe that is what God asks of every one of us: to take a chance on the other members of the body of Christ. To risk behaving lovingly toward someone who is not a friend, as our spiritual worship. God showed great mercy to all of us. God continually forgives us and asks us forgive each other so that we might be at peace with one another. God asks us to live our worship 24/7. How will each of us respond? Amen.