

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." ⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the ancestors ⁹ and that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will confess you among the gentiles
and sing praises to your name";

¹⁰ and again he says, "Rejoice, O gentiles, with his people";

¹¹ and again, "Praise the Lord, all you gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";

¹² and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the gentiles;
in him the gentiles shall hope."

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

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

In the year 41, about 7 years after Jesus died, the Emperor Caligula of Rome was assassinated in a coup, and the Praetorian Guard, an elite military force, scoured the palace looking for victims and suspicious people. Hiding behind a curtain, they found a man cowering in fear and provided him safety. Then, they named this man the new emperor of Rome. He was a unique man – not the son of the previous emperor, not a military hero himself – so, a surprising choice. He was the son of a military hero. He was the uncle of Caligula, but he was also a man with a limp, a speech impediment, and a muscle tremor. His name was Claudius, and he was, relatively speaking, wise and just and productive – advancing safe roadways, clean water systems, and marine trade routes, taking an active role in government and encouraging real debate in the senate – unlike other emperors.

But he was also known for his efforts to restore Roman religions. He was skeptical of new ideas and mystical spirituality (such as worshipping an invisible, monotheistic God or a God who came to earth as a human), and at some point during his reign in Rome, he began to hear about some controversy involving the Jewish people and a man the historical records name as “Chrestus.” (The majority of scholars agree that “Chrestus” is a reference to Jesus *Christ*.) So, early on in his reign, it is documented that Claudius ordered that the Jewish people stop meeting together, but the controversy just grew and grew, and at some point, he expelled all the Jewish people from the city.

Now, this was the third time in about two hundred years that the Jewish people had been exiled from Rome. There is no doubt, friends, that the Jewish people have been persecuted for thousands upon thousands of years. They deserve to be remembered and respected for their resilience and the generations of trauma they have endured.

But the problem in this situation was, Claudius did not make any distinction between a Jewish person who believed in Jesus and a Jewish person who did not believe in Jesus. He just exiled all the Jewish people over this tension he was hearing about “Chrestus.” Which left, in Rome, only the Gentiles who believed in Jesus, who

were free to continue worshipping in their house churches for several years by themselves without their Jewish siblings in the faith.

Then, when Claudius died in 54, his orders for the Jewish exile expired. His successor and step-son, Nero, allowed the people to return. So, when people like Priscilla and Aquila, Jewish-Christian tent-makers who had met Paul in Corinth got the news, they returned to their home in Rome and their faith community. Priscilla and Aquila are interesting, because Luke mentions them in the book of Acts when they lived in Corinth and Paul specifically mentions them in his final chapter of Romans when he writes, “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life.”

Between the writing of Acts and the writing of Romans, they’ve moved back!

But the collision that happened when the Jewish Christians like Priscilla and Aquila returned was not pretty. Imagine being there yourself. You’re a non-Jewish believer in Jesus. You live in Rome. Through ignorant political racism, half of your church was thrown out of their homes and businesses for several years. The Christians who remained weren’t familiar with Jewish customs. In the meantime, the church had established traditions and rituals - This is how we celebrate Easter. This is how we baptize converts. This is what we bring for potluck dinners. And this is how we decorate the sanctuary on holidays. And suddenly, people whose names you had almost forgotten return and expect things to go back to the way they remember.

It’s not just uncomfortable, it’s ugly. And that’s what Paul is referring to here in Romans 15. He’s telling the Gentile Christians to welcome the Jewish Christians! This is interesting to me because most of the time, when we think of the early church, we’re thinking that the Jewish Christians are being told to welcome the Gentiles, to be open-minded and kind to the new kids who don’t know the traditions, but this time, it’s the opposite.

And Paul is also reminding the Jewish Christians about their historically grounded calling to worship alongside Gentiles. He quotes not one, not two, not three,

but four different verses from the Old Testament. He says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction." Meaning, the Old Testament is still really important and relevant.

Then he quotes them . . . Psalm 18:49 *"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name."* Deuteronomy 32:43 – *"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."* Psalm 117:1 – *"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and extol him, all you peoples."* And Isaiah 11:10 – *"The Root of Jesse [or the Messiah] will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope."*

Four different references. All to say, the Jews and the Gentiles were *meant* to worship together from the beginning. The people of God *are* the people of the world – *all* the children of the world, not just some. And, of course, four is not the extent of the obvious intention for the love of God to be shared globally. God told Abraham and Issac that they would be blessed *in order to be* a blessing to the nations. The birth of Jesus was celebrated by non-Jews from the Far East. Jesus praised the faith of the Roman Centurian and the Syrophoenician woman as being greater than that of the Jewish people. And the Ethiopian eunuch was excited to hear the good news of Jesus and be baptized by Philip in Acts as one of the first converts to the news of the resurrection!

Friends, our Old Testament scriptures may center around a particular dysfunctional family of people who became known as the Jews, and God *did* make a special covenant with them, but they were *never* meant to keep it to themselves. God is the God of all creation, the whole world, and we are all meant to worship as one – not in the same language or with the same specific rituals, but with respect and love for one another.

But, from the beginning, as we talked about last week, there has been tension when it comes to worshipping with those who are from different backgrounds. And you know what happens - the wider you open the doors of the church, the less control you have of what happens inside the church. And nobody wants to give up control. So we segregation and worship as we darn well please.

But, we talked enough about that last week. I'm not going to rehash all that again. If you missed it, it's available online. But what I do want to say is this. Today is World Communion Sunday. Today is one of the most important days of the year. Today, and Christmas Eve, and Easter are three days in which we feel deeply connected to the global church as we all gather at the table and recite the words that remind us of Jesus' self-sacrificing love.

Not all churches gather on Ash Wednesday, or Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday. Not all churches celebrate Epiphany or Christ the King Sunday or Advent or Lent. But 99% of churches that proclaim Jesus Christ is Lord are breaking bread together today. People in South Korea and the Philippines and Argentina and Mexico and Angola and Nigeria and Kenya and Germany and Italy and Ukraine and Russia and India all hearing the same words and remembering the same events.

It's moments like this that help us restore the vision that we have more in common with one another than we often admit. Friends, Republicans and Democrats are breaking the bread today. The rich and the poor are breaking the bread today. The highly structured Catholics and the extremely independent Congregationalists are breaking the bread today. The Messianic Jews and the Baptists are breaking the bread today. Today is a gift to all of us. A reminder that around the table in Jerusalem there were Jews and non-Jews, introverts and extroverts, one who was about to sell Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, one who would openly deny knowing Jesus that night, one who was in favor of armed rebellion, more than one who was hungry for personal power, men and women (though Leonardo da Vinci forgot to include the ladies). As diverse as the first table was, our table is even more diverse. And there is room for even more. All God's children are welcome here. Even those who aren't quite sure what that means are welcome here, and we, who are established here at Dunn's Corners, ought to welcome our neighbors so that we might fulfill Paul's vision and "live in harmony with one another and with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." It's not as easy as it sounds, but let's try it out here today. Amen.