

Our Corporate Life

Today's scripture lesson is from the Book of Romans. Romans is an interesting and sometimes difficult book in the New Testament. It was written by Paul later in his life to the Church in Rome. It was Paul's introductory letter to the Roman Church, because he had not yet visited that church in his missionary journeys. An interesting thing about the Church in Rome was that it was not started by either Peter or by Paul. It was possibly started by some of the Jews who had been in Jerusalem during Pentecost.

We know from Acts 18:1-2 that the church in Rome had existed for some time. and it was made up of both Jewish and non-Jewish followers. A crisis for this church began after the Roman emperor Claudius expelled all of the Jewish people from Rome. About five years later, all those Jews, including many who followed Jesus, were allowed to return. When they did, they found a church that had continued to flourish, but had become non-Jewish in its customs and practice. This culture clash created lots of tension, and by the time Paul wrote this letter, the Roman church was divided. They disagreed about how to follow Jesus, debating about whether or not non-Jewish Christians should observe the Sabbath, eat kosher, or follow other Jewish regulations and customs.

Paul then writes a LONG letter to the Roman church, which starts out like a letter we would recognize - It sends greetings and tells how Paul would like to visit the church in Rome, but then it bends into a gentle rebuke of how the Roman church is divided between Gentile and Jew, and then moves pretty quickly to a discourse on the wrath of God, the Jewish law, righteousness through faith, the love of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the gift of eternal life. - and that's just the first 5 chapters - there are 11 chapters to go. It's a good thing Paul didn't decide to just text them! But this is Paul's God-given purpose in life. He has met the risen Christ, and is now starting churches through sharing his unique encounter with Jesus and maintaining churches and working with them to find clarity in their belief.

It is significant that Paul had been a Pharisee for his adult life, since, in this role, he had learned how to reason, debate and deliberate in the style of the day. This letter is Paul's "Apologetics for Dummies" and along with Paul's thesis on theological issues, in broad strokes, it instructs the Church of Rome how to hold the essentials or core beliefs in common, while allowing for some variations in 'disputable matters.'

And today, when we are ordaining and installing new and returning Deacons and Elders, let's see how, through mutual purpose, mutual affection and mutual approach, we can hold each other in fellowship and work together for the glory of God at the same time as we allow for differences and individual expression.

In Acts 13:3, we read that Barnabas and Saul were commissioned to become apostles for Jesus, official representatives to the world of non-Jewish people (or Gentiles). It is at this time that we notice Paul using the Roman version of his name in his ministry to the Gentiles. We see that Barnabas and Paul were sent out by the church of Antioch with fasting, prayer and the church leaders laying their hands on Barnabas and Paul in blessing and solidarity.

Mutual Purpose

And that is one of the things that I've looked at with fresh eyes - Barnabas and Paul were not at all 'rugged individualists.' They didn't go out preaching to the world on their own. They were chosen and supported by the church in Antioch. The Antioch Church was the first place that the followers of Jesus were called Christians. The Antioch Church was a diverse community, made up of both Jews and Gentiles who worshipped together. They sent out and supported Paul and Barnabas as well as financially supporting Judean Christians during famine. Blessed by the Holy Spirit, Their shared understanding of the gospel, this acceptance of Jews and non-Jews alike and then their willingness to physically and financially support other Christians signified that they were a strong, confident church.

I pray that as we ordain and install this new class of Elders and Deacons, that our church will continually work to discern our specific purposes in the community and in the world. Not only in our worship of God and the welcoming of diverse people into our own fellowship, but also in financial support and amplifying the cry of those in need and those who have been victimized by malefactors or circumstances.

Mutual Affection

One of the best parts of being part of this church is our shared affection for each other. I guess that's true of most churches, right? When you work with others, pray together, share a vision of what could be, listen to each other's joys and concerns, and just spend time together, you develop bonds of caring and empathy with your spiritual siblings.

This love comes to us and develops in response to God's own love for us: As Paul says in Romans 5:8 - "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

This is not romantic love, but rather, like parental love can be, something that aids us in difficult moments, helping us to see others as God sees them, and encourages us to sacrifice for their needs. Every day that I'm with people in this church, I see whole-hearted giving of care and affection when people spend time, energy and creativity on behalf of this congregation. Leading such devoted people needs dedicated leaders who have true love for all of God's children.

I pray that all of the leaders in this church appreciate the care and affection poured out by so many people here. I also pray that the membership of this church appreciates the dedication and love that these leaders have for the people of this church.

Mutual Approach

Something that is a little less “spiritual” in the welcoming of our new leadership is the approach that they have to leading this congregation. One way to consider it is the church’s culture, as in our expectations about the way we do things. There are many ways that leadership is a balancing act. Formality balances with casualness & ease. Generational ideas about music, communications and propriety need to be calibrated and explained. New ideas and old ideas about our mission, our building, financial giving, and our staff are constantly shifting and unfolding.

Change will always be with us, and now, as much as at any other time, we need grace and guidance from the Holy Spirit to accept and adapt to those changes. Or, to take changes and adapt them to our own understanding of what is required of us as Christians.

I am excited to shortly welcome our new Elders and Deacons. It is not an easy kind of leadership, but it is satisfying and it is important work. May God bless this congregation through these people and their faith, endurance and hope. Amen.