

**Sermon given on 08.29.10**

**Rev. Kerry Waller**

**Romans 15:4-13**

**"A Good Welcome"**

Today is the last Sunday of our Summer sermon series on the Letter to the Romans. I chose to do a series at this time because summer seemed like a natural time of the year to dedicate ourselves to one particular book of the Bible, and to seek to glean all the knowledge we could from it. Of course, Romans is such an amazing book we really could spend another 20 summers on it and not get quite all of the wisdom out of it. Regardless, I hope you have found something new for your faith in its words, something that encouraged you as you seek to live a godly life.

Let's turn to the 15th chapter of Romans, found on page 163 of your pew bible.

In this second to last chapter of Romans, Paul picks up a familiar theme. God is faithful, even in the face of the people's faithlessness. By virtue of their baptism, Christians must no longer let sin have dominion over them. They are not to live as the pagan world does, but to give spiritual worship to God through sobriety of thought and bodily purity. Paul calls the people to realize in common life the justice of God which Christianity celebrates. He tells the Roman Christians of the power of God for salvation to strengthen and encourage them with this instrument of moral instruction and exhortation.

In this chapter of Romans, Paul exhorts the people to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed them. There is not really another part of our lives, outside of the church, where we welcome so many people who are different from us.

We typically spend our days with people of similar backgrounds. Teachers spend the day with teachers and a certain age group of children. Retired people enjoy, I imagine, bridge games and showing off pictures of their

obviously superior grandchildren. Computer engineers spend their days with other engineers, and so on.

In our social activities we group ourselves as well. Musicians hang out with musicians, knitters with knitters, basketball players with basketball players. Republicans go to fundraisers with fellow Republicans. Our families are made up of people who are more or less similar to us, except for Crazy Uncle Alan, or whoever your crazy relative is.

It is church where we get to practice this welcome that God has given us first. We come from different suburbs or the city into this one place at the same time. We all merge in the parking lot, walk down the same hall, and sit in the same sanctuary, blending ages and races and genders and backgrounds. We who had many differences now have one identity: Christian.

It is not as important where we came from, or what our primary language is, or our age or interests, or our positions on social issues or faith questions. We can become one people, worshipping together one God.

It is with that common background that we strive to welcome people as we have first been welcomed, whether it is welcoming people who need a church home, or people who have come from another country, or who have not realized the presence of God in their lives.

The welcome that Christ first gave us is the one he gave all those who he met in the Gospels. From the stories in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we can read that Jesus welcomed all kinds of people. He spoke with widows and orphans, with prostitutes and tax collectors, with lepers and others who were sick, and also with rich people like Nicodemus, even with people who were hostile to his new message like the Pharisees or the scribes. From within his own circle of 12 disciples were all kinds of men, from poor fishers to rich fishermen, to name just four of the disciples.

And in Christ's welcome they were all considered equally valuable. He did not sit some at the head of the table, some at the foot, and some in the kitchen. At Christ's table there was room for all, welcome for all.

Church is a little taste of Christ's welcome. But what are we welcoming people to? It's a good start to be welcoming, but what comes after the welcome? I think the apostle Paul would say that God's hope, and our hope in God is what we come for, and what we find when we seek the Lord.

Professor Susan Eastman writes: "This is the gospel in a nutshell. Christ has welcomed us, all of us, and brought us home to God and to each other. Let us not be sentimental about this welcome; to open our arms to those who otherwise are strangers and even enemies is nothing short of a miracle of grace. The experience of that welcome is the way we learn that "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us".

When I first came here we were not passing the peace of Christ during worship. The worship committee discussed it after someone suggested it, having seen it at another church. We debated for a little while, after all most everybody got a handshake on their way in, were we just duplicating something already done? And then we discussed where in the service it should go. Traditionally the passing comes right before communion so that anyone who has a problem with a brother or sister in Christ can be reconciled to that person and have their hearts properly prepared to receive the body and blood of Christ.

But obviously, it can happen anytime, not just during worship, not just during church, not just between those of us who know one another to be Christians. The welcome is more than just a handshake.

It is confirming our trust in God's promises, our joy at being with fellow believers, and our confidence that comes from hope in the Lord.

To invite others into something is to show that you believe it has value. We welcome others as we were welcomed not only for their good, but for our

own. It is good for the community to remember the promises of God. It is good for the community to reorient ourselves to living like Christ, not like the world. It is good for us to gather together to hear again the Holy Scriptures and the witness of Christians through the centuries.

As Paul urged us, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. And 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." Amen.