

“On Welcoming”

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 14:1-12

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions” Romans 14:1

I can still very vividly recall my first experience as a first time visitor here at Atonement. The date was Sunday, July 31, 2011, the morning of my ordination and installation as your Pastor. I still recall some of my initial impressions regarding the community of believers here at Atonement: “warm,” “welcoming,” “inviting,” “generous,” “hospitable,” “family-like.” In fact, since that day, I consistently hear visitors use these kinds of adjectives to describe this parish and its parishioners. I believe it to be true. I believe it not only because of my personal experiences but because this is a Christian congregation with Christ-centered people. As our recently adopted mission statement says, “Atonement Lutheran Church is a Christ-centered congregation that cares for the whole person with the Good News of Jesus Christ.” As St. Paul reminded us in our Epistle reading this morning, “we welcome and receive one another into our fellowship because God has received and welcomed us into his fellowship” (Romans 14:1, 3; 15:7).

There is a tendency, though, even among Christians, to receive and welcome one another into fellowship under false pretenses and dishonest motives. There is a tendency to receive and welcome one another into fellowship under the disguise of being warm, welcoming, inviting, generous, and hospitable, only to bait a person into an argument or to bicker and quarrel with them over differing opinions. In this way, it is a lot like springing a trap.

I recall a rather interesting personal experience in which a group of people invited me to have a meal with them, knowing that I am a Pastor. We were having a great time and having a great conversation until someone steered the conversation toward faith and religion in order to quarrel and debate with me. At that point, one of the members of the group said, “The existence of God is logically impossible.” To which my response was, “Funny, most people throughout human history have believed that the idea of God not existing is logically impossible.” Now, to be sure, this is a conversation that a Pastor can and should be able to handle, even if he is ambushed by it. This is the kind of conversation a Pastor wants to have with unbelievers. Yet, there was a deceitful and dishonest mood to the whole gathering and conversation that led me to question the sincerity of the group and the standing of my friendship with them. If we are truly in fellowship with one another and have a friendship with one another, why can’t we be more honest, open, and sincere with one another?

Jesus experienced some situations in his Ministry where others welcomed and received him into fellowship and conversation under false pretenses and dishonest motives. We see an example of this when some Pharisees came up to Jesus and asked him questions about certain Old Testament commands regarding marriage and divorce (Mt 19:3-12). We also see examples of this when those same religious leaders asked Jesus whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (Mt 22:15-22). They draw

Jesus into fellowship and conversation only to try and destroy him and his reputation. This is not true, godly fellowship.

I am creating these different pictures of fellowship for us this morning because they put us into a better position to understand the situation in the first century Roman Christian Church to which Paul is addressing. I am sure that many of us are aware that the first Christian congregations were organized and structured in a much different way than our churches today. There were no separate Church buildings where the Christians left their homes and gathered once a week. Rather, the first Christians congregated and gathered into the homes of some of the members. Archeologists have even dug up examples of these house churches. There were often sections of homes that were remodeled into sanctuaries—holy and set apart places for worship. So rather than the whole Christian Church in Rome meeting at one time in one place for worship there was an overseer or bishop that likely was in charge of all of the different groups of Roman Christians that met for weekly worship in various homes.

Some churches today attempt to recreate this kind of situation by organizing their congregation into small groups that meet in each others' homes on a weekly basis for prayer, Bible Study, and fellowship. People become very close to one another and tend to congregate into fellowship circles. They bond over similar attitudes, positions, and interests. And this can be a very good thing. I imagine that one of the strengths of the house church format in the first century Roman Christian Church was that the members could get to know one another on deep, personal levels. They knew one another's joys but also their hurts, pains, and challenges. They knew then how to encourage one another in prayer and with the Word. They knew how they needed to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). I imagine that the Spirit of God worked in a situation like that, through his Word and his Sacraments, to strengthen the faith and belief of these members and help them to grow as followers of Christ.

Yet, we also learn from Paul the potential pitfall of this kind of Church organization. The danger is that it may create a "silo effect" whereby each group is willing to welcome, receive and trust others within their group but is weary and suspicious of others of another fellowship group, even if they belong to the same Church! Or different groups may bond and unite around varying opinions on different issues—even issues that the Bible neither condones nor condemns (adiaphora matters). These opinions then can cause division within the greater Church. As Paul instructs at the very beginning of our reading this morning, "As for the one who is weak in faith (or less bold in his convictions concerning things that the Bible neither condemns nor condones), welcome him (into fellowship), but not to quarrel over opinions" (Rom 14:1).

At the time of Paul, the hot-button issues that created a whole host of opinions concerned Jewish laws and customs regarding food and the observance of certain festival days (Rom 14:2-6). Since the Roman congregation consisted of both Jews and Gentiles that were divided into various house churches, there were some in different fellowship groups who believed that their consciences were free with regard to Jewish laws and customs. There were other Jewish Christians who didn't quite know how to fit into their faith and life in Christ the Jewish laws and customs that they grew up observing. The result was that members of different house churches were welcoming and inviting one another only to quarrel over their opinions concerning these kinds of issues; issues that aren't a matter of faith and doctrine and about which the Bible neither condemns nor condones. And so Paul cuts through these conflicts by centering everything in Christ. He reminds them that "God has welcomed them into his

fellowship in Christ” (Rom 14:3). Therefore, they are to “welcome and receive one another without quarreling just as Christ has welcomed them, all for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our God has paid a great price to bring us into his fellowship through the purchase of forgiveness of sins through the blood of the Lamb. Indeed, our fellowship with God was brought about not only through the betrayal of one within his own inner circle, but also because of the abandonment of his own Father, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46)? The price you and I could not pay has been paid. Through faith and trust in this Christ and his salvation work on our behalf we are truly welcomed into eternal fellowship with God. We are without a doubt in his inner circle. Shall we not then afford the same grace to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? Shall we not welcome them? Not under false pretenses. Not to quarrel and bicker about things of which are not matters pertinent to our Christian faith that the Bible neither condemns nor condones. Not to gossip. But welcoming one another to listen in a spirit of true Christian fellowship. Welcoming one another to encourage one another. Welcoming one another to bear one another’s burdens. Welcoming one another by putting the best construction on all things. By God’s grace we are a Christian congregation of *witness, mercy, and life together*. In this manner, we are a Christ-centered congregation. God has welcomed us into his fellowship and to be a part of his greater story of salvation through his Son. Let us welcome one another. Amen.