

Hope through the Acceptance & Attitude of Christ

Romans 15:4-13 (NIV)

⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. ⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name." ¹⁰ Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." ¹² And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." ¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Three themes that resonate in the church season of Advent are hope, peace, and joy. Last week, we were reassured of the peace we have on the mountain of the Lord's temple - peace with God and peace with each other because our sins are removed, because God has made us majestic by his works. This peace makes our gatherings here as a church gatherings of hope, a hope that things and the people here will be different than elsewhere in the world. And you should have that hope here because we are gathering around the Word of God. "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." (verse 4)

We are blessed to have many new people here at Light of the Valley. Hopefully, when you first came, everything was bright and shiny and new. People greeted you with smiles. They introduced themselves because they actually cared to get to know you. Some showed you this worship folder thingy, maybe sat with you so that you wouldn't sit alone in worship. You had hope that this would be different than other experiences you've had with people, particularly people in other churches.

But then there was a time that troubled you. No one came up to you that day and said hello. Instead you saw other people in their groups chatting and laughing and you felt outside of it, that the group was closed off to you. You felt ignored, unimportant. Or, you were talking with people, but they said something that made you feel like you were being talked down to. Maybe they said something insensitive, hit on a topic that you care very deeply about but they spoke about it dismissively.

In these moments, you wonder if the church is any different than the world around us. I don't have to go to a church to be ignored and talked down to and treated insensitively. Actually, I can go around on the internet or other places to find people who will affirm my views. So, why gather around believers who are supposed to behave differently only to have them hurt me? The actions of people which hurt us cause us to lose hope that people who follow Christ are any different.

This is not a new issue for people coming together as a church. The Romans Christians had to wrestle through it as some considered one day of the week to be holier than another day of the week, or considered a vegetarian diet superior to a non-vegetarian diet and despised the people with differing views. There was judgment. There was contempt for the people that they called brothers and sisters in Christ. The hope for unity within these gatherings of believers was threatened.

So, it's not surprising that there are conflicts in our church, as well as any gathering of Christians. We probably could even make it a sticking point of whether or not we are vegetarian, whether we are free or not, of Sunday being the most holy and only day to worship and discouraging others from even considering gathering to worship God on any other day. People who have been through a church remodeling project are often hesitant to ever do another one because people get very opinionated about what the "right" way for the remodeling and cause divisions when their way of thinking is not the way the project moves forward. People insist on their own ways, get defensive if their ways are challenged, and feelings get hurt. Sometimes we hurt people here at church knowingly, other times ignorantly. No one apologizes. The hurt festers. Divisions happen. Hope that this body of believers can be different dies.

Satan loves it when this happens. He wants to take those hurt feelings and tug at them. He wants to rip that wound open more and more and pour salt in it. He whispers in your ear that these people here who call themselves Christians are no better than the rest of the world. They are just as selfish and inconsiderate and stupid as the rest. They don't appreciate you. They don't care about you. They don't like you. That's why they hurt you. You shouldn't come back. You shouldn't be with them. Get rid of them! Divide! Leave!

With conflicts and divisions happening within gatherings of believers, is there any hope that we can be different? Yes! That's why Paul is writing this section to the Roman Christians. "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (verses 5-6) And what is that attitude? "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (verse 7)

When we put ourselves and our opinions and our desires first over other people and trample over them to get our way, causing conflicts and divisions in doing so, we are sinning. But this is why God promised that the Root of Jesse would spring up. Jesus, the descendant of King David who himself was the son of Jesse, came into our world in order to take all our sins upon himself – all our selfish acts, all the times that we have trampled on other people by insisting on our own way, all the times when we have judged and condemned people for their personal opinions, every time that we have done anything to cause division. He paid for your and my wrongs.

This is why Jesus accepts you. It's not because you or I have been so good or haven't been as selfish as others or haven't been strongly opinionated in a way that trampled over others as we insisted on our way, but because he paid the price. It is this same forgiveness, this same payment, that moves us to accept people here, even though they have hurt you. Because Christ paid the price, I have no right to hold on to how they have wronged me. The only way that we are not torn apart with divisions is by viewing each other with the acceptance of Christ - that when I look at this other person, I see someone that Jesus loved enough that he gave his entire life for them, that I see their sins against me forgiven, that I see someone covered with the perfection of Christ in just the same way that I am.

When I view the people here with the acceptance of Christ, this also changes my attitude towards them. Christ accepted us because he became a servant for the Jews as well as the Gentiles. One group was not superior to the other – neither was more loved, more forgiven, holier. No, all had the same forgiveness in Christ. The Root of Jesse served even the people who hurt him – those who hurt him ignorantly and purposefully. He did not think that he was above them. Through the acceptance of Christ, I seek to serve even those who have hurt me, to put them first, to actively ask and listen to what they think, to show them that I do care – even when my thoughts and opinions and priorities differ from theirs. This is producing fruit in keeping with repentance, in keeping with how Christ accepted us.

While living the attitude of Christ of putting others first, this does not mean that you are supposed to be a doormat and let people sin against you left and right, for them to abuse you, and you just take it. When they sin against you, God calls us to call that brother or sister in Christ to account. If they continue in a pattern of sinning against you, you gather witnesses, you get the pastor, you get one or two of the elders. This is good for them, to help them produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Also, even while we accept one another in Christ's forgiveness and treat each other with his selfless attitude, you may have to love them with boundaries. What does that look like? Maybe this means that I will love that person from across the room because they have a pattern of behavior that hurts me, even though they don't mean to. Maybe this means having another person there with me to help keep the peace, to help be my voice. Maybe this means that I am okay acknowledging that I am uncomfortable with this person and have the right to say that and do something about it. Maybe that means I am not always available at every text, email, or phone call or that I set the expectation to respond in a day. When we make boundaries with people, we do this not selfishly, but for the sake of this body of Christ, this group of believers, so that divisions can be healed and conflicts quelled.

What hope do we have that this group of believers will be any different than the rest of the people of the world? We have hope because Christ has accepted you and me with our sins forgiven by what he did for us and that we are clothed with his perfection. This also leads us to put people first and serve them the way Christ served us. This is what brings us together through conflicts and divisions – no matter what has happened before or will happen in the future. This is the hope we have for this group of believers that we will be united by the acceptance and attitude of Christ. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (verse 13) Amen.