

## **Strangers no more**

### **Romans 15:1-13**

Welcome everyone to a very special day in the life of the Hatfield Church of the Brethren. We will be welcoming three new adult members and recognizing the three youth members who joined by baptism in July. It is always exciting to welcome new members, even more so since this is my first opportunity to be the officiant. With that in mind, I departed from the lectionary selections for this morning and went in search of something that spoke to the questions of membership in Christ's church. There are a number of Scripture verses that touch on this subject, but the one that caught my eye was found in Romans 15.

#### ***Read Romans 15:1-13***

In William Barclay's commentary on Romans, verses 1-6 are introduced as the marks of fellowship. This is what our congregation is 'a fellowship of believers.' These are the marks of fellowship that we should be aspiring to according to Barclay:

1. "The Christian fellowship should be marked by the consideration of its members for each other." Paul exhorts the church at Rome

that those who are strong in the faith should look to the good of their weaker neighbor to build them up. Today we are welcoming three adults who already have a history with the Church of the Brethren. We also have three youth, the weaker members if you will, who will be helped by those of us who are strong in the faith. They look to us to model what it means to be a Christ follower in a world where that is becoming increasingly counter-cultural to live out the message of Jesus.

2. “The Christian fellowship should be marked by the study of Scripture.” Paul reminds us that the study of Christian Scripture draws us toward encouragement in our faith. Regular attendance at Sunday worship, participating in Sunday morning discussion of how current events and Scripture intersect with one another, and individual study of Scripture helps to build our “spiritual muscles.”
3. “The Christian fellowship should be marked by hope.” In today’s social climate, perhaps this is one of the most important points on which the church should focus its efforts. Hope is not about life being all butterflies and rainbows. Hope is what we find after we have walked through the valley of the shadow of death and have not despaired because we know our God is alive and active in the world today.
4. “The Christian fellowship should be marked by harmony.” Paul often addressed the differences that were troubling the early

churches. As human beings we are never all going to agree on every subject; however, as Christians we are called to live in harmony with one another. Seek to understand your neighbor, more than trying to convince him that your point of view is the only correct one. We are all part of the body of Christ despite our differences and no one part is any more or less important than the others.

5. “The Christian fellowship should be marked by praise.”

Remembering what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, how can we not take time to give praise for such a priceless gift. Today we give praise for the new members who have chosen to make Hatfield their new spiritual home.

Moving on in his commentary, Barclay introduces verses 7-13 as the “inclusive church.” From the beginning, the people of God were to welcome all into their society, as these words from Leviticus attest:

The **foreigner** residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were **foreigners** in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 19:34](#)

We might forget that even in Jesus’ time there was a great diversity of people groups. In the story of Pentecost from the Book of Acts, a number of these groups are named:

<sup>5</sup> Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. <sup>7</sup> Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome <sup>11</sup> (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

We see at the very inception of the Christian church there were all types of people, and with that all types of dress, speech, and habits. Of this group 3,000 were baptized that day, even with all their differences. This confirms the words of Isaiah spoken centuries before:

<sup>3</sup> Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,  
“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”  
And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.”

<sup>4</sup> For this is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—<sup>5</sup> to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

Isaiah 56:3-5

Paul had become convinced from his knowledge of the Biblical writings of his day that, just as Jesus came into the world to save all men, Jews, and Gentiles alike, so the Church must welcome all men, no matter what their differences may be. Christ was an inclusive Savior, and so his Church must be an inclusive Church.

His Church is to offer hope to a hurting world. To light the way to a life of joy in the Lord. To the life of joy that engenders peace within the believer. On this day of receiving new members into our family at Hatfield, I close with Paul's own words:

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. AMEN

Lynne McMullan Allebach

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