



March 18, 2018 - ACCEPTING EVERYONE

Romans 14: 7-12

Given by Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

I read in a recent issue of *Time* magazine that people who attend worship are likely to live longer than those who don't. The reason? Worship generally reduces the stress in one's life. I myself have been known to have the opposite effect on people with my preaching! Just warning you! But then, my job as a guest preacher is to make you wish that Pastor Giuseppe were up here in the pulpit today instead of me! I'll give it my best shot!

We live in such a divided world at this moment in time! Rich vs. poor; conservative vs. liberal; people of color vs. white people; Republican vs. Democrat; straight vs. gay; America vs. the rest of the world; gun rights advocates vs. gun control advocates; those who support the President vs. those who resist. Do you ever get tired of it? It's so bad that you don't dare to talk to people about anything anymore for fear of upsetting them. Society is becoming so exclusive. What about the church? What kind of people are welcome at Nativity Lutheran Church?

A whole lot of churches have "Visitors Welcome" on their signs...and a whole lot of churches don't mean it, either! What they really mean is "We welcome people like us." Yet this club mentality is so foreign to what we know about Jesus. In today's Gospel lesson some Greeks come looking for Jesus. It's so strange—that Gentiles would come looking for a Jewish Messiah. Why did these foreigners come seeking Jesus anyway? No doubt, in part, because they knew one thing about Jesus: that he accepted everyone. In this divided world where so many people are touting their differences and dividing into enclaves of the like-minded, how can we in our church be more like Jesus? How can we be truly open to all people?

Our Epistle lesson from Romans helps us understand how we can become a more inclusive church. If we want to be open to all people, we need to know three things.

The first thing is this: We are in this thing called life together. We don't live by ourselves.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, **“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.”** We are not lone rangers in this life. We travel in a herd. It all began back in Genesis when God said to Adam, **“It is not good that the man should be alone.”** Why? Because we belong together!

A newcomer walks into an Irish pub and orders three mugs of beer. He sits in the back of the room, drinking a sip out of each in turn. When he finishes them, he leaves. The next day he is back at the bar, ordering three more beers. The bartender tells him, “You know, a mug goes flat after I draw it. The beer would taste better if you bought one at a time.”

The man replies, “Well, you see. I have two brothers—one in New York and one back home in Dublin. When we all left home, we promised that we'd drink this way to remember the days when we drank together.”

The bartender admits that it's a nice custom and leaves it there. The man becomes a regular at the pub. Then one day he comes in and orders just two beers. All the regulars take notice and fall silent. The bartender says, “I don't want to intrude on your grief, but I want to offer my condolences on your loss.”

The man looks puzzled for a bit; then he laughs. “Oh, no, everybody's just fine,” he explains. “It's just that my wife and I joined a Baptist Church and I had to quit drinking... Hasn't affected my brothers, though!”

Whoever we are, wherever we are in this life, we need to remember that we are not alone. We have brothers and sisters all over the place, and having the support of others as we travel this journey of life is so very important.

You good Lutherans know Ole and Lena from up there in Minnesota, my home place. Well, one night Ole was staggering home from the tavern, weaving side to side on the path when the Lutheran pastor saw him and, like a good Samaritan, offered to guide the intoxicated man back home. As they approached the house, Ole suggested that the minister come inside for a moment. He told the clergyman, “I jüst vant Lena to see who I've been out vit!” [I myself have been used as an alibi for more than one person in trouble!]

I don't know any of us who can make it though life without calling for back up. Life is too threatening, too challenging, too frightening, too lonely to do it on our own. We shouldn't ever take for granted the presence of other people in our lives—especially those God has placed closest to us.

I read with curiosity about a brother and sister from England who lost contact with each other decades ago after their parents died. Then a few years ago, Ken Whitty, age 65 of Stockport, wanted to find his sister. He wrote an open letter in the local newspaper, which produced a phone call. As it turns out, his long-lost sister lived just 300 yards from his house. Whitty had walked by her home many

times throughout the years and may have even seen her, never realizing that she was his own sister!

We can't ever forget that we live in community with others. All you who sit together in this place today are related—not only by virtue of sharing in one human family, but you are all blood relatives through the cross of Christ. What does it mean for us? It means we need to take care of each other.

A few paragraphs before our Epistle lesson for today Paul writes, **“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”** Now I know that a few of you may have had the unpleasant experience of “long-lost” relatives showing up at your doorstep, asking for handouts. If we're *all* related, that could be a little overwhelming! On the other hand, to love others is to offer them the best we have, whatever that may be.

One of the members of my last church in Ohio was arthritic and couldn't walk much any longer. Although never married nor a mother, Faye still had a heart for children. She thought about what she could do to make the world a better place even with little money and poor health. She knew she had one gift to offer—she could crochet. Faye heard about some kids in a poor district in Cincinnati who were going to school without any gloves or mittens to keep warm, so she started her mission. Faye asked church members to bring in their unwanted yarn, and she began crocheting up a storm. The first year she made 28 sets of hats, scarves, and mittens for kids. The next year she got a call from a teacher in Cleveland, and she whipped out 100 sets for those classes. Soon she was crocheting for children around the world, hundreds of sets a year. And this from an aging, arthritic, diabetic lady who was poor! Why was she so intent on helping? She understood that we are all in this thing called life together!

Our caring is limited only by our lack of vision. What do you see when you look around you? Do you know the people next to you? If not, why not? This world is full of hurting people, delightful people, creative people, lonely people, loving people, lost people, rejected people, searching people, beautiful people. They are all part of us. We do not live to ourselves. We are in this thing called life together.

The second truth we need to know if we are to be open to all people is this: Christ died for everyone. Paul wrote to the Romans, **“If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”**

Christ died for one reason: We needed a Savior!

A drunken man gets on the bus late one night, staggers up the aisle, and sits next to an elderly woman. She looks up at the man in disgust and says, “I've got news for you. You're going straight to hell!”

“Oh, man,” cries the fellow as he jumps up out of his seat and shouts, “Stop. I’m on the wrong bus!”

In the third chapter of Romans Paul says that we’re all on the same bus. **“There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**

That’s the bad news. But the good news is at the end of Paul’s sentence: **“They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.”** Paul said it even more triumphantly in Romans 8:1: **“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

It doesn’t matter who you are, doesn’t matter what you’ve done, doesn’t matter where you’ve been; for those who are in Christ, there is now no condemnation.

Before we believe this for others, we need to believe it for ourselves. Renowned theologian Paul Tillich said that faith is “the courage to accept acceptance.” How right he was! We go through life repeating the mantra, “If it sounds too good to be true, it must not be true.” This skepticism may serve us well in many areas of our lives, but it also keeps us from believing the most incredible good news of all—that Christ nailed our sins to the cross once and for all, and we are free from condemnation, We don’t have to beat ourselves up any more!

Why did God do it? Because God loves us. What’s more, as author and priest Brennan Manning wrote, “In loving us God makes us lovable.” And get this: because God loves all people, all people are lovable. It has nothing to do with whether *we* like them or not, nothing to do with what they have or have not done, nothing to do with what they can or cannot become. It’s simply this: God loves them so they are lovable...and if they are lovable, we who owe love to everyone had better get our act together and love them!

A lot of people in this world are starved for love. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield made a career of putting himself down and presenting himself as a rejected husband, father, and child. He quipped, “I asked my old man if I could go ice-skating on the lake. He told me, ‘Wait til it gets warmer.’” Rodney said, “It’s tough being married. My wife kisses the dog on the lips, yet she won’t drink from my glass!”

Those remarks make us laugh; yet for a lot of people in this world, that has been their experience at home and in the world. How often do we read about abuse by parents, by children, by caretakers, by neighbors? Even the church can be abusive. Religion can be toxic. Religion that makes people believe that God won’t accept them until they fulfil some kind of requirement is abusive religion. But the true gospel tells us that God loves and accepts us first; we respond in gratitude and service second.

Do you understand what I'm saying? Because Christ died for everyone, we can never see our church as some kind of private club. We cannot make rules about who is and who is not acceptable to God. We can never predict who the next saint will be. I have seen the poor become rich and bless the church, and I have seen the rich become stingier with every passing year. I have witnessed the rejects of society become church pillars while the pillars of society became rejects in the church. We don't know people's hearts, much less their futures. How could we ever become gatekeepers for the kingdom of God? We need to be swinging wide the church doors so that all can enter. Christ died for everyone.

We are all in this thing called life together. Christ died for everyone. The last thing we need to know is this: God is the only judge we have. Paul wrote, **“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. As it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow before me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”**

Our Values Statement at Nativity is printed in every Sunday bulletin. It affirms our openness to all people with the words, “We therefore welcome equally all people, regardless of religious office, position, possessions, education, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental ability, physical ability or other distinctions.” This statement is a wonderful proclamation of Nativity Church's hospitality. It's the reason Jill and I joined this congregation a few years back. Yet as I have hobnobbed with you dear people of this congregation, I have discovered that some really struggle with one particular aspect of this Values Statement—full acceptance of the LGBT community. I can empathize with you. It took me decades to get to where I am today. When I was a child, we never talked about gay people in the church. After finishing seminary, I was holding the door open for gay and lesbian people, but I was still struggling over what I had been taught that the Bible said. It took me another 20 years of my own study to realize that those passages in the Scriptures that people use to keep gay people at arm's length have nothing to do with sexuality at all, nothing to do with love. They speak against violence and abuse. Even so, it's hard to let go of what we grew up believing, isn't it?

One Sunday a preacher decided to use a visual demonstration to emphasize his sermon. As he began to preach, the pastor put four worms into four separate jars. He put the first worm into a jar of alcohol; the second into a jar full of cigarette smoke; the third into a jar of chocolate syrup; and the fourth into a jar of good clean soil.

At the conclusion of the sermon the minister reported the results: The worm in the alcohol—dead! The worm in the cigarette smoke—dead! The worm in the

chocolate syrup—dead! The worm in the good soil—alive! Then the preacher asked the congregation, “What did you learn from this demonstration?”

An elderly lady sitting in the back raised her hand and replied, “As long as you drink, smoke, and eat chocolate, you won’t have worms!”

Sometimes the conclusions we draw at first are not the right ones. That could surely be said about the Christian church and the LGBT community. After all, why has denomination after denomination changed its understanding of the issue if the old conclusions were correct? Even if we don’t understand everything, we, for our part, are called to embrace people and let God be the judge of us all. Jesus taught us that those who judge are in far greater danger of losing their salvation than those whom they judge.

It’s crazy that the church would ever have to make an issue of who should be welcome, isn’t it? Shouldn’t this be a ‘no brainer’ for those of us who follow Jesus? Why would we *not* be open to all people? Fear! We are afraid of being wrong, afraid of what people think, afraid of those who are different, afraid of what we don’t understand. I don’t know anybody in the church who hates people; but I know many who are afraid. It’s not hate, but fear, that keeps us from loving those who are different from us.

Dear friends, don’t live in fear. God’s perfect love casts out fear. We are not to worry about what the world thinks; we only need to be concerned about what God thinks.

Author Jerry Cook wrote, “When love, acceptance and forgiveness prevail, the church becomes what Jesus was in the world: a center of love, designed for the healing of broken people, and a force for God... One of the greatest services a church can offer is a community to provide a place for people to be brought to wholeness—to be healed physically, spiritually, and emotionally.”

That’s what I see for our church. We at Nativity have a calling to be a truly welcoming church to all those who may have been rejected in other places but still have a heart for God. When we called our pastor a couple of years ago, we might have gotten a racist minister—there are plenty of them out there. We could have gotten a xenophobic pastor—there are many who are ethnic snobs. We might have gotten an Italian ex-priest for a pastor—Oh, wait, we did! But our Pastor Giuseppe is a man who has a heart for all people. Aren’t you glad we got him? I am! We are blessed!

Who, then, is welcome in this place? And if not everyone, then who decides if even *you* are acceptable?

I wonder whether I would be welcome in this church if you knew everything about me! I who stand in the pulpit today grew up playing not only bridge, but also black jack—and both for money! I have been both a church organist and a rock band drummer. I have drunk everything from communion wine to Bacardi 151,

have spent five days in a Franciscan monastery but also been to a nude beach, have taught everything from New Testament interpretation to how to avoid STDs. I have not only been on a grand jury and been a character witness in court, but I have also been slapped in the face by the town police chief and fined for illegally harvesting wild rice (out of ignorance, I might add.). I have been reckless and ruthless as well as trustworthy and tender. I have gotten not only love letters but also hate mail, not only been admired and affirmed but also despised and rejected (even from church people).

This is more than you wanted to know about me, but it's who I am and where I've been; but through it all God has always accepted me. That's why I hug children and old people, why I love women and men, gay and straight people, why I delight in people of color as well as fellow Scandinavians. It's why I try to comfort the distraught and reach out to the mentally handicapped, why I don't care how much money someone makes or how much education they have or who they call family. It's why I don't worry about where people have come from or what trouble they have been in. You see, I only want everyone to know that there is a place for them in my heart and in Christ's Church. I want them to know that there is a safe place to be who they are. And I hope that's what you dear people want, too.

At a time when the world around us is falling into more divisiveness, let us at Nativity say, "Enough!" We are all one together. Christ died for all of us. God is the only Judge we have. Let us proclaim not only in our words, but more so in our deeds that the doors of this church are open to all. Let us always show by our hospitality that everyone is welcome in this place.

Amen.