

Accept One Another
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 12, 2021-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Romans 15:1-8

Starting this morning and continuing all the way through the end of November, we will begin a new sermon series. That series is called “One Another,” and it is based on the one another sayings from the New Testament. Throughout the New Testament, various writers, mostly in the letters, give us instructions about how we ought to treat one another as Christians. Care for one another, honor one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, admonish one another. All these little instructions are the Holy Spirit’s way of teaching us how to be a community. When you put all these little instructions together, you have a kind of curriculum for Christian community.

It’s a curriculum we need right now. In the church, in our neighborhoods, in families, our sense of community has been challenged. There are all sorts of reasons for that. Even before the pandemic, loneliness was on the rise. You’ve heard me and others talk about that. The pandemic made that worse. It physically separated us from one another. There are church people I’ve barely seen since March 2020. I haven’t seen my own family in Canada for almost 2 years. I really miss them. The pandemic has also taught us habits of isolation. When I’m walking through the grocery store I instinctively look for the least populated aisles and I instinctively give other people a wide berth. When I’m walking my dog down the street and I see someone else coming toward me on the sidewalk, I instinctively move out to the road. I’ve been formed to imagine a six-foot circle around people. These were necessary habits, in my judgment, but at some point I’ve got to unlearn them. I need to return to the habits of community. We hope that this sermon will help us all start to make that move. We hope that this sermon series will help us grow those habits of community that move us towards each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our first ‘One Another’ comes from the book of Romans. Romans is a good place to start our thinking about community, because Paul’s whole purpose in this book is to create a new united community out of people with significant differences. The church in Rome is a mix of Jews and Gentiles, and Paul is trying to help them live together as the family of God. This is no easy task because Jews and Gentiles have lived in sharp separation. They have totally different cultures. They eat different foods. They live by different calendars. In the past they’ve found the idea of sharing meals together physically repulsive. Now Paul is calling them to come together.

When people talk about how its frayed our sense of community, they will sometimes say that the pandemic has caused divisions. They will talk as though the pandemic is the source of the rifts between us. I don’t think that’s right. I was talking with a pastor friend the other day, and I think he had a better analysis. He said the dividing lines have always been there. The differences between us had always been there; the pandemic simply revealed those differences.

Have you had this kind of experience over the last year? You’re talking to someone about some aspect of the pandemic—say vaccination. And in the course of the conversation they say something about vaccination and the issues surrounding it that is totally different from what you think about vaccinations and the issues surrounding them. You don’t argue with them. You just nod your head and say, “Yeah. Yeah. I hear what you’re saying.” But inside you are saying. “That’s what they believe?! Oh my goodness! I thought I knew them and that’s what they think?!” And, maybe, even though you may not want to admit this, in your mind you went from saying, ‘that’s what they think’ to, ‘*that’s the kind of person they are.* That must mean they’re one of those people. Maybe they’re one of the people who believes all those things.’ All of a sudden you look at this person in a different way. And then a little distance forms between you. You become a little more cautious with them, more guarded. Before the conversation maybe you would head towards that person in the narthex to talk. Now maybe you just smile and wave. Or maybe you still go over and talk to them but you talk about safer more surface things: “Did you see the game last night?” “Nice weather, eh?”

Let’s dissect that incident for a moment, because many of us have had incidents similar to that one over the last couple of years. There are two things happening in that moment. We are taking a difference with another person and turning it into a story about them, a difference story. They are not like me. They are one of

those kind of people. And then we are moving away from that other person. So we tell a story of difference and we make a move.

In our passage, Paul calls for a completely different response for those who follow Jesus. He calls for a different movement. The conflicts of the last years have caused us to move away from each other, Paul calls us to accept one another. Accept one another. The Greek word is *proslambano*. Proslambano is a compound of two Greek words. The word *pros*, which means towards or beside, and the word *lambano*, which means to take hold of something, to grasp it. Put those together and *proslambano* means something like pull towards you. It's a word that paints a physical picture. It's a picture of you putting your arm around another person pulling them in and saying, "Come on, sit down beside me here and let's talk." When I think of *proslambano*, I think of my mother. When I'm home for a few days and I spend too much time talking to my siblings and my nieces and nephews, but not enough time talking to her, she will come to me put her arm around me and say, 'Come and talk to me. You need to talk to your mother!' My Mom is *proslambano*-ing me.

Our passage translates the word *proslambano* as accept. "Accept one another." That's an okay translation. But in the way we use the word today, acceptance is a pretty passive concept. When we talk about 'accepting' something we often mean put up with it or tolerate it. I have arthritis in my hands but I've learned to accept it. My granddaughter got a tattoo on her wrist, but I've learned to accept it. The guy who sits in the pew in front of me has weird political beliefs from me, but I've learned to accept it. That's often how we use the word. When we use the word that way, acceptance is a kind of truce. A non-aggression pact. A ceasefire.

And if that's all acceptance means, it's easy. We can accept another person without really being all that close to them, without even having much to do with them. But is that what Paul is calling for here? Is that the sense of *proslambano*? No. Clearly not. If acceptance can be a ceasefire, *proslambano* is a hug. If acceptance is a curt nod across the narthex, *proslambano* is a warm embrace and a deep conversation. If acceptance is putting up with someone's presence, *proslambano* is inviting them to go out for coffee.

So, accept one another is an okay translation, but maybe a better one would be something like embrace one another, draw close to one another, pull others toward you. Maybe even embrace one another. We don't usually think of Paul as a hugger. Do you picture Paul as a hugger? Probably not. But maybe we should.

The rest of the passage just confirms that warm, deep sense of connection Paul is looking for: don't think about pleasing yourself, each one of us should please our neighbor to build them up. Be willing to endure insults for each other, like Jesus was willing to endure shame and insult for you.

Let's not romanticize this. It's not easy to move towards broken people. There's a reason we human beings prefer to move away from people who seem different than us, because people have sharp edges, and when you pull them close to you, those sharp edges will cut you, they will wound. Getting *proslambano*-close to people is really hard. It's risky. There will be conflict. There will be blood. Just like there was for Jesus. What did it cost Jesus to pull us close to him? What did the sharp edges of our sin do to him? Paul grounds his call to accept and embrace one another in Christ. Accept each other as Christ has accepted you. Take hold of one another, just as Christ has taken hold of you. Embrace each other, as Christ embraced you. Christ's embrace of us is the ground and the model of your embrace of each other.

How Close does Jesus pull you? How would you describe your relationship with Jesus? What do we mean when we say, 'I am accepted by Jesus?' We're not just saying that he tolerates us. Jesus wants to commune with the deepest part of me, Jesus wants to know every part of me, he wants my life, my soul, my all. When he saved me, he didn't just save me and he didn't just accept you, he put his arm around you and pulled you close. And he wants to be close with me even though he knows I am a pain, even though he knows that I will hurt him and I will not always be a faithful friend. He wants to be close to me even though he knows that fellowship with us will cost him his lifeblood. Whatever seems difficult about getting close to that person who is different than you, I promise it's not as difficult as what Christ went through to get close to us. If you feel like it's going to take a lot of sacrifice to be in community with some other people in this congregation, I promise you that it's nowhere near the sacrifice Jesus made to be close and in community with us.

The differences between Christians are real. Those differences are significant. In a fallen world sometimes those differences will lead to splits and separations. Many of those differences between are so complicated that they won't be resolved in our lifetime. Paul knows this, but he wants the people in the Roman church to see and he wants us to see, that these differences are not ultimate. They are not our story. Underneath these differences we are all the same. We are broken sinners saved by Jesus.

Let me close this sermon with an observation and a practice. I mentioned how when we hear someone who has a different opinion about an issue from us, our instinct is to subtly move away from the other person, but I would like to suggest to you that though it might be hard to really talk to someone about their differences, and although you might be afraid of potential conflict, these differences present you with an opportunity to know more about each other. Probe beneath the surface of people's deep convictions and you will find stories. Probe beneath the surface of people's strong opinions and you will find experiences and relationships. Probe beneath the surface of that difference and you will hear about things your neighbor loves. Probe gently, with kindness, and you will learn about her heart so that maybe even though you might not agree with them at the end of your conversation, you might love them more.

I was talking with Colin Watson, the head of our denomination this week. As you can imagine, he's dealt with his fair share of conflict. He was asked to visit a council of a local church who was very concerned with the denominations statement on the George Floyd incident back in June of 2020. They had a series of questions to ask him about institutional racism and systemic racism. Colin went and talked to them. Colin is a person of color—he's from Africa—and so before he got into the issues with them, he told them about his experience of growing up in Patterson, New Jersey and how his family had actually been redlined after they immigrated here. He told them stories about the ways prejudice had impacted his life. Then they had the discussion. They still ended up seeing things differently. But at the end of the meeting the council expressed their differences with understanding and respect and mutual love. Accepting one another, embracing one other in our differences can be a place where we can grow in love.

And finally, I would like to suggest to you a really good practice for accepting one another. It's a practice that we are going to do together this morning. The Lord's Supper. At this table we are reminded that underneath all our differences, at the center of our identity, we are fundamentally united. We are all sinners saved by the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord. Jew, gentile, rich, poor, black white, male, female, republican or democrat, conservative or liberal—all these distinctions seem so important out there in the world. But at the table they take their proper place in relationship to the deepest and most fundamental part of who we are: we are children of God, united and saved through the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. And while our differences may sometimes cause distance between us, one day we will sit beside each other at the wedding supper of the Lamb. And no one will have to tell us to proslambano each other, because we will be one.

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