

Romans 12:14-21
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 20, 2022

Human relationships can be tricky. Think about it: two sinners are involved, neither one totally doing what is right. How can they get along? Yet they need to if they are to function in any effective way. We're going to explore those dynamics as we listen to the apostle and urge

LIVE IN PEACE

- I. Maintain unity in the brotherhood
- II. Overcome opposition of enemies

Living in peace results when we maintain unity in the brotherhood. Unity exists here. We have been brought to faith in Jesus. All of us needed to be because we are by nature lost in sin. We enter life estranged from God, really, his enemies. He reached out to us, for many, at our baptism, when we were quite young, and made us his own. For others the connection came later in life. We know Jesus lived and died for us, to rescue us from sin. We trust him as our only Savior. We rejoice in his forgiveness. And we know we are not alone in receiving that blessing. He has brought more people to faith and has brought us together as a group of Christians. We have unity of faith that is shared in our congregation and in our synod.

Despite that oneness there can be challenges. Personalities don't always mesh. Conflict may arise or avoidance of others. So the words of Paul in this text are fitting for us to hear.

The unity of our brotherhood will be expressed in what we do. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." We care for each other. We share that concern in both good time and in bad times. When life is going well we rejoice together. We give thanks for the blessings our fellow Christians have received. We congratulate them on successes. We are not jealous of their happiness. Our feelings are genuine, not a put on act. The same bond of feeling holds true when times are tough. We "mourn with those who mourn." Sympathy kicks in when others suffer loss, whether it is of a loved one through death or other setbacks and difficulties. There is compassion for those suffering from sickness, job loss or accident. We pray for each other. We offer more than words of care and comfort. We take action to help. Many of you have experienced such support from your fellow members here at St. John's.

As we walk together in faith we strive to "Live together in harmony." That may mean ignoring some rough edges. We all have our quirks and annoying habits or characteristics. We don't demand that everyone else be a clone of ourselves. Can

you imagine how boring the world would be if we were all identical? Since we are sinners all, slights and faults will crop up in our everyday contacts. We forgive as we have been forgiven by our Savior. We try to understand the perspective of the other person and where they were coming from. Maybe they thought of an angle we had never considered. Compare their thoughts with God's Word before you criticize. Remember the bond that unites us before pouncing on differences. It is also comforting to be on the receiving end of such consideration from your fellow believers.

These efforts to maintain unity in the brotherhood are promoted by love. "Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with those of low position. Do not be conceited." Pride is a problem. All of us want to think we are important. (We are important to Jesus as he valued us enough to save us, but that worth is in him, not in our personal qualities.) Our feelings are misplaced if they puff us up to think we deserve special recognition.

When we exalt ourselves we tend to look down on others. It is easy to find fault with others and to forget that they could do the same as they look at us and our behavior. So who is high and who is low in reality? Yet when it comes to external conditions, some have a lower status in society. It may be in income, degree of success and position held or because of public wrong committed. Even where that exists, remember that we are all the same before God: equally sinful, equally saved by the blood of Jesus. When we recognize those truths, our acts of kindness and love will extend to all. We will not form cliques or view others as beneath associating with. As we help one another and show consideration, it will not be with condescension, making clear our supposed superiority. This attitude of not considering others beneath ourselves applies not just to people but also to tasks. Common duties are not beneath us. In other words, we are talking about humility.

I mentioned a bit ago that our efforts to maintain unity are promoted by love. We recognize that each other person is also someone for whom Christ died. So there is his love that binds us together. Also our love for Jesus is being expressed. The one who truly set no limits on his love but reached out to all and died for all also did it for you. Motivated by his love we will surely follow his example. He spent time with outcasts. Opponents criticized him for associating with prostitutes and tax collectors. When Jesus cited fruits of faith that reveal the presence of faith in believers in his picture of Judgment Day, he mentioned feeding the hungry, clothing the needy and visiting those in prison. Or other times he cited doing right and said, "Go and do likewise." Maintain unity in the brotherhood to live in peace.

II.

As challenging as it is when we are on the same side, how will peace happen when dealing with one who is aiming in the opposite direction as you are? Paul calls on us to overcome opposition of enemies. Again, wrongs occur in life. Like is the case with fellow believers, we just don't get along with some people. They rub us the wrong way. Each of us acts without thinking as we live out our natural selfishness. We hurt and harm each other with our words and actions. We overlook the needs and feelings of others.

Sometimes the wrongs committed are deliberate. We take advantage of others. We strive to undermine the success they enjoy. There is meanness in what people say and do.

There is also the matter of persecution encountered. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Sometimes negative action comes specifically because of our Christian faith. Jesus said that as he was himself mistreated, so would his followers be. He met death and so would his disciples. We may think of ancient times when Christians were fed to the lions in the Roman Coliseum. However, I've read reports that more Christians are losing their lives at the hands of unbelievers in modern times. Then there are the other forms of persecution that can come, such as discrimination on the job because you maintain Christian ethics or avoidance socially, putdowns on your values or lifestyle for what you won't engage in because you want to honor your Lord. A clever, snarky response may feel good, or even strong words of condemnation, but Paul says here, like Jesus did in today's Gospel account, to bless those who persecute you. Pray for them, and not for their harm but for their good.

Continuing in that direction Paul instructed, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." In other words, don't start quarrels. That doesn't make us a doormat. We must stand up for Christ and what is right. We will endure personal slights but will not hide our confession. Speak the truth, but do so in love. Others may not want to listen to what God says and may not want to live in peace. That's why the instruction noted, "as far as it depends on you." Don't seek to stir up trouble but don't compromise your convictions either.

Especially don't seek revenge. If someone hits you, what is your natural response? Hit them back, a bit harder than they hit you, right? But does that action solve the problem? No, it likely escalates it as the other person responds in the same manner. Paul lays out a better path. "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." It is not our role to carry out justice. God sees and knows what is happening. He will take care of the situation. He has representatives on this earth for that purpose. Within the family it is parents. At school that is the role of teachers and principals.

The government has a legal system to settle wrongs in society. All of those individuals are flawed human beings so can make mistakes. If a person escapes justice in those formats, God still has a way of dealing with them. Sometimes it is through the events of life (although be careful about making pronouncements about your interpretation of causes of what happens in the world) and definitely there is the eternal judgment awaiting. When we take over the role of meting out justice by seeking revenge we tend to ignore our own role in the conflict and magnify the wrong received. We also could misidentify the perpetrator. God's hands are better ones to leave it in.

The Lord also has a better way for us to respond to wrongs. Quoting the Old Testament, Paul continued, "On the contrary, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head.'" Be nice to the wrongdoer. "Huh?" we may object. "He (or she) doesn't deserve it." That's exactly the point. Your kindness may open their eyes to how wrong was their treatment of you. The burning coals may produce pains of contrition or sorrow for their sin. Repentance is what we are seeking. That's how it happens that we follow the final instruction of the text, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." We want to win them over for Jesus.

So for yourself when wronged: "Forgive." Do not harbor ill will or plot revenge. As Paul wrote in another place, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Follow the example of Joseph with his brothers in the First Lesson. God's free and full forgiveness of our sins is what moves us in that direction. How else could we feel when our load of guilt has been removed?

What the Apostle has offered us here is not merely advice on getting along better or having an easier life. Nor are we trying to gain God's approval and get into heaven because we are so nice to everyone. We already have forgiveness and heaven as a free gift of our Savior, who paid for all our meanness and thoughtlessness and everything else, including our seeking to get even and failing to forgive. Rather, overflowing with God's love received, we will share it with others in forgiveness and kindness as we seek to bring them to Jesus.

With the challenges involved in interacting with other sinners, we might retreat to our own cocoon, separated from the world. But that helps no one. God wants us to be involved with those around us: with those who already believe in Jesus as their Savior, to build them up in faith and encourage them; and with others, to win souls for the Savior. So take the gospel with you into the world and use it with both friend and foe. Live your faith openly. Share your faith. God will bless you with peace.