

Romans 15:4-13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,

and sing praises to your name’;

and again he says,

‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’;

and again,

‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,

and let all the peoples praise him’;

and again Isaiah says,

‘The root of Jesse shall come,

the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;

in him the Gentiles shall hope.’

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sermonic interrogation: How does Christ unite all humanity? Answer: When his Spirit claims our hearts.

Jesus: The Hope of the World

Last night Ken mentioned how this is a very busy time of year for me and for pastors in general, which is really kind of ironic, because historically winter was not a busy time for people of my ancestry – I’m almost three quarters German, and Germans were people who knew what winter was all about. Winter was a time of slowing down, of hunkering down and preparing for the shorter days and the longer nights. The harvest was over, and there wasn’t a lot of work for people to do. And it’s a theory that the onset of winter became important religiously. Many cultures had ways of celebrating the winter solstice, and our Christian Advent and Christmas traditions coincide with the onset of winter. And we humans have a strong psychic need to find some reason to celebrate the onset of winter with its long night, short days, and cold weather. We refuse to succumb to darkness, and so in the midst of the darkness of winter, the winter solstice itself, we celebrate light. When you think about it, the fact that we insist on celebrating light in the midst of darkness says a lot about us; it says that we are very hopeful creatures. It also explains why pastors, rather than hibernating for the winter, end up getting busier around this time of year.

For Christians this is a glorious season. But we’re not the only religion that celebrates; as I mentioned, the human psyche insists on celebrating light in the midst of darkness, so while we celebrate the arrival of Jesus as the “light of the world,” our Jewish neighbors celebrate Hanukkah – a religious holiday that is also about light overcoming darkness, about God’s miraculous provision in

a time of scarcity, and our African neighbors celebrate Kwanzaa – a religious holiday about unity and community which like Advent and Hanukkah use candles to symbolize “light amidst darkness.”

And I know a lot of Christians who feel offended by the recent inclusion of these holidays in our culture – Kwanzaa is a relatively recent holiday that has only been around for fifty some years, and while Hanukkah is an ancient holiday it has only been recently that the holiday has become familiar to non-Jewish Americans. There are many Christians who resent the fact that in the interest of being politically correct we no longer greet our neighbor during this season with “Merry Christmas,” but more with “Happy Holidays.” Many Christians feel that their religion is under attack.

I’m not in favor of taking Christ out of Christmas (as our Santa Claus culture seems to have done), but acknowledging and respecting other religious observances is, I would argue, a very Christian thing to do, because Christianity has historically been a religion that welcomes our neighbors. Paul says as much in today’s reading: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (verse 7). The apostle Paul, throughout his life, faced two big challenges: First, he faced challenges in persuading Jews that Jesus was the messiah; second, he faced challenges from Jews who accepted that Jesus was the messiah but who believed that Jesus was strictly the messiah *for the Jews* – they didn’t want Gentiles corrupting their religion. That’s why in today’s passage Paul cites Old Testament scripture that defends his belief that the messiah came for Jew and Gentile alike (verses 9-12). There are Christians today who have the same attitude toward non-Christians that Jews did toward Gentiles, those who would want to build a wall between themselves and those whose beliefs don’t meld with theirs (and of course there are Christians who build walls between themselves and *other Christians*). Paul is emphasizing that **Jesus is not strictly the hope of the Jews but rather the hope of the world**.

Because being a Christian is not strictly a matter of clinging to some exclusive orthodox beliefs as it is to **being transformed into Christ’s own image**. Through the Holy Spirit we have some understanding of Jesus’ character; his love, his compassion, his acceptance, and his forgiveness. So how can we treat others as outsiders? How can we draw lines that say, “Jesus belongs to US, and not you.” Jesus never stood for such exclusiveness in his lifetime, and inasmuch as he reigns in your heart and my heart, he won’t stand for it today.

So how do we bring Christ to our Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist neighbors? BY WELCOMING THEM! Show them Christ’s love and compassion and hospitality, a hospitality that embraces differences and humbly works to not just accept others but to love others, not to be territorial, because when we’re territorial we are making Jesus territorial, and Jesus doesn’t belong to us so much as we belong to Jesus.

May this Advent season be a time when you can embrace the joy of knowing that Jesus is the hope of the world, the one who has come, who dwells with us now, and who will come again and draw all creation to himself.