

Receiving Into Our Heart

ROMANS 15:1-7

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“ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER, THEN, JUST AS CHRIST ACCEPTED YOU.” (VS. 7, NIV)

Please pray with me: *From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, God, deliver us. From the laziness that is content with half-truths, O God deliver us. From the fear that hides from new truth, O God, deliver us, so we may be free and truly live. Amen.*

My text is from the seventh verse of chapter 15 of Romans: **“Accept one another, then, just as Christ has accepted you.”** It is the climatic verse in a long passage of some thirty verses, beginning with verse one of chapter 14, in which Paul has been urging that Christians live in unity and peace. Now that is a state to be desired in the church, and certainly a worthy dream, but is it possible? Paul believes it is and he believes the way to living in peace and unity is through acceptance. That is the unifying theme of this passage as he begins the fourteenth chapter with a call to acceptance – **“Accept the person whose faith is weak”** – and ends with his call to **“Accept one another just as Christ accepted you.”**

Now the word translated here as acceptance is an interesting Greek word that scholars struggle to translate into English. In the NIV, it is translated as *acceptance*, in the KJV, it is written as *receive*, and in the NRSV, we read it as *welcome*. In those three words – *accept*, *receive*, *welcome* – the translators are trying to convey the idea of receiving someone into one's self, welcoming a person into your heart. It is the same word that Jesus uses in the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel where he says, **“Let not your hearts be troubled...I will come again and will receive you to myself...”** (John 14:1, 3) Paul means that we are to accept and welcome others just as Jesus accepts and welcomes us.

There is just one other place that Paul uses this word acceptance and it is in his very personal letter – the only personal letter of Paul's that we have – to Philemon. The cause for the letter is a runaway servant or slave names Onesimus, who has befriended Paul while the apostle sits in prison in chains. Indeed, Paul calls him “my son.” But Paul knows that Onesimus has run away from Philemon, and, more than that, he has a history with Philemon. We gather from the letter that Onesimus was a lazy employee and one who stole from his employer. Yes, Philemon certainly has reason to be angry with Onesimus and to distrust him and Paul admits to that, but Paul wants them to reconcile, to make peace, by Philemon, for love of Paul, accepting and receiving into his heart Onesimus.

So here we are back in Romans and Paul wants Christians to live in peace and unity with others who are different for the love of Christ. Why are we to accept others and receive them into our hearts? Because when we were afar off Jesus came to us, when we were lying broken by the road of life he stopped to tend to us, when we were yet

estranged sinners he died for us. If Jesus would do that for us, then we must do no less for others.

Why don't we accept someone and receive him or her into our heart? There are myriad reasons, I suppose, but perhaps the chief reason is that we put up walls to shield our hearts and to block acceptance. Sometimes it is only by the grace of God, literally assailing our shields and assaulting our defenses, that we have our hearts opened.

That happened to me long ago early in my ministry. Due to some unfortunate angry and violent encounters in high school, an unacknowledged prejudice developed in me toward Hispanic persons. No one knew it, for I kept it to myself, but it was there. And from that experience I learned that sometimes the experiences in early years can shut down our minds, or worse, close our hearts. It did mine.

Years later, I am working part time in an inner city church and one of my colleagues, Bill, falls ill. My assignment is to fill in for Bill by running the evening program in our church gym called "Open Door to Life." Filling in for Bill was very uncomfortable for me. He had a charisma and an athleticism that I lacked and so I knew I could not do the job as well as he, and the program served almost exclusively Hispanic youths. (The "youths" were really young men in their late teens and early twenties.) Those seeds of prejudice planted in high school had grown into a distrust of Hispanics that was not warranted by any reality other than my small experience, and that first night the distrust was strong. Yet, I had a job to do and so I ran the program, interacted with the youth, kept the rules, and joined in on a few games. The night went well with a gym full of thirty young men playing hard and fair, challenging and sweating, laughing and joshing. When it came time to close I blew the whistle and shouted it was time to head home, and quickly the young men moved to put away the balls, equipment and games and head out the door. I stood at the top of the stairs by the exit to say goodbye, and as I stood there a strange thing happened. As the youth passed me to go out the door they all smiled at me, thanked me in English or Spanish, and they hit me. They punched me in the arm and shoulder, they slapped my back and playfully hit my chest and stomach as they went by, and with every hit the wall to my heart cracked and crumbled and fell.

My life gained a foundational truth that night. We will never be set free to truly live until the walls fall and the way to our hearts is opened and we can fully accept every other person as a precious creation of God and as a sister or brother loved by Christ.

Well, that is about racism, but there are other prejudices. Of course, there are. And so I must tell you about Suzy – which is not her name, but I must change it to protect her. It began a few years ago. I have a bad habit, especially around Christmas, of not opening my mail and it drives the woman I live with wild. The mail piles up and finally I open it. Well, there was an envelope that sat unopened on the counter for weeks, I suppose, and Christmas had come and was nearly to its Twelfth Day and still I had not opened it. One night as we prepared for bed Sally could no longer take it and announced, "I am opening this card." She opened it and said, "Why is a blond on the West Coast sending you a picture of herself?" I sleepily muttered, "I don't know. Maybe it's one of the ministers I helped." An unconvinced voice said, "Well, she is very beautiful." I looked, and the woman was attractive but I did not have a clue as who she was. Sally started reading the note in the card and then said quietly, "Jeff, this is Jack.." Of course it isn't Jack my mind said. I knew Jack and that wasn't Jack, but, yet, still, there was something familiar in the face. Then I read the note.

It was Jack, who now was Suzy and in the card she was telling us that her life had changed and she wondered if she could come to see us. We were on the telephone that night – it was earlier out West – and we spoke to Suzy and told her to come.

Suzy did come to see us, and experienced some of the rush and confusion that is our lives. We talked in the living room and we talked over the dinner table and we talked on into the evening. We talked of memories, of friends, of our children, of faith and we talked of Suzy's new life. It was incredibly moving to hear someone I thought I knew – and I did know my friend well – reveal the deeper feelings and fears and dreams that had always been hers. She had always known she was a woman but she was born into a man's body and had done her best to be what family and society and culture expected. As a man she was a success, yet she carried hurt and sorrow within her that did not lessen but only grew with time's passage. Finally, while on a business trip and driving to Boston she decided that she could bear it no more and at high speed turned the car toward a bridge abutment. She believed the only way to end her pain was to take her life. What happened next is not clear but Suzy knows it was an angelic intervention and she next found herself sobbing and uninjured, holding onto the steering wheel of a wrecked car.

That highway to Boston was Suzy's Damascus road experience. She knew she must stop living a lie and become the person God had made her to be. It was a long and lonely way she journeyed, enduring anger and rejection from many close to her, scorn and confusion from those who could accept her only as a man, yet wonderfully loved and accepted by her children. (Does that not say something wonderful about parents?) Suzy endured because she found strength from God to be who she was.

During that evening it came to me that my friend still sat across from me. Yes, the gender of my friend was different but her soul was the same. She was the same person, only less veiled and guarded and more real to herself and to me. I told her as we parted, "You are the same friend I've always admired and loved."

She said, "Oh, thank you." And we hugged.

My sisters and brothers, we will never be set free to truly live until the walls fall and the way to our heart is opened and we can fully accept every other person as a precious creation of God and as a sister or brother loved by Christ.

Today the Church at large is beset with controversy about gays, lesbians and transgendered persons. The controversy over the newly elected and soon-to-be Bishop of New Hampshire is only the most visible part of the storms roiling the Church and the society it must speak to. There are no easy answers or simple solutions, but the Bible points to a way, and it is acceptance, receiving each other into our hearts and then in a relationship of loving acceptance working through all the other issues that occur when people with differences abide together.

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you."