

“Open Doors”

A sermon by

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Romans 15:7

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).

The single most important feature of this or any other any sanctuary is neither pulpit nor pew. Nor is the most important feature the beautiful artwork that adorns the building, the stained glass, the carved wood, or even the gilded chandeliers. With Mr. Ivey, our organist and choir director being out of town, I can even admit that the single most important feature of a sanctuary is not even the organ, nor is it the choir loft. (These are bold words from a person standing in front of and at the mercy of the choir.)

Let it be known that the single most important feature of any sanctuary is the door. Through these doors come the people of God to worship, to pray, to praise and to sing. Through these same doors the people of God go out into the world to serve as ambassadors of Christ. As such, you go through these doors into a land that is foreign, difficult and, at times, even hostile towards the people of God.

Through these doors into the church there may come others who are equally foreign to the church. Some come to satisfy a curiosity. Of these there are some who may come to look upon us much like they would look upon a museum exhibit. But others, others may come seeking sanctuary, safety and protection from the worldly concerns that have weighed so heavily upon their souls.

For those of us who are already within the doors of the church, there is a choice and an important question to be answered. When a foreigner comes through, or perhaps even just up to these doors, what then shall we do?

We will reach out or hand. But, what then will we do? Will we beckon them to come, taking their hand and warmly welcome another into this place of sanctuary. Or, will we use that same hand to close the door, leaving them outside of the church? The work of welcoming those who come among us is unlike any other work in the church. There is a peculiar, but important, way for this to be done. The text before us begins with a subtle word-play. Hear it again, with a more literal translation.

The Work of Welcoming

“We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the ones who are weak, but do this not to accommodate ourselves. Each of us must accommodate our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not accommodate himself; but, as it is written, ‘the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’”¹

¹ Romans 15:1 – 3 (with David Green’s translation notations).

Keeping in mind that there is no precise English equivalent of the letter's poetic expression, we must still focus on its clear meaning: Jesus Christ himself refused every opportunity to accommodate his own personal preferences. In this same way, the people of the church must refuse completely to accommodate our own wishes and whims.

John Calvin is well remembered as a father of the Reformed Tradition. He is not often remembered as one who had a warm, fuzzy disposition that welcomed all who passed by. But, that said, Calvin had a clear understanding of the church's imperative to welcome others.

With regard to this text, he wrote, "...nothing impedes and checks acts of kindness more than when any one is too much swallowed up with himself, so that he has no care for others, and follows only his own counsels and feelings."² He then continues, writing, "...that we are under obligations to others, and that it is therefore our duty to please and to serve them, and that there is no exception in which we ought not to accommodate ourselves to our brethren when we can do so, according to God's word, to their edification."³

The letter to the Romans and John Calvin's explanation of it bring to bear two separate images that are important the church, as it is understood within the Reformed Tradition.

The first image has to do with a hierarchy of leadership.

1. The highest authority to whom we submit is no less that Jesus Christ, as Lord and Head of the Church.
2. The secondary authority is the Holy Bible, which bears witness to Jesus Christ, our Lord and head of the Church.
3. The third level of authority is found in the collective wisdom of the church as it has been recorded in a wide variety of documents. We look to and speak of those that are important to our Confessional Heritage because they help us to understand the Bible, which bears witness to Jesus Christ.
4. The fourth level of authority to which we submit is the church as it is gathered and is seen today. We submit to the collective wisdom of the church because it is, at least in principle if not in practice, informed by the collective wisdom of previous generations, faithful to the Scriptures, and ultimately obedient to Jesus Christ.
5. Finally, the lowest level authority, the one to be most distrusted, is the individual. In a world so broken by sin, we are able to conjure explanations, able to convince ourselves that *our* personal wishes and whims are correct. But, we simply cannot trust ourselves.

² Calvin, John. Calvin's Commentaries, volume XIX. Henry Beveridge, trans. (reprinted 1991), p. 514.

³ Ibid.

The second image summoned by the language of the letter has to do with our obligations to others. Admittedly, we are uncomfortable with the very *idea* that we are under any obligation to any other person. Such thought runs contrary to our value of individual and personal freedoms of every kind. But, the language of obligation is as commonplace as the Lord's Prayer.

Without thinking we repeat the words day after day, week after week: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Hear again these familiar words, this time with a new understanding, and a more literal translation of the words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: "forgive us that which we are legally obligated to fulfill, as we forgive those who are obligated to us."⁴

The work of welcoming those who come among us is unlike any other work in the church. There is a peculiar, but important, way for this to be done. The images of authority and obligation are all called upon to make this simple, but important point.

The Journey to the Church Doors

Consider for a moment the person by whom we are seen to be the church. Remember that I am not speaking about theoretical theological propositions. As the church, the Body of Christ, we are to welcome human beings into our fellowship. I speak of individuals who are created uniquely in the image of our God.

The journey that brings a person to the door of a church is often surprising, especially to one who finds himself or herself at the church door. This journey rarely involves smooth roads and predictable events. Often, we can see the traveled path when looking back in retrospect.

Anne Lamott, a Christian and an author, writes poignantly about her journey to her Christian faith. Here is a part of her description:

"My Coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like Lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way I moved across a swamp of doubt and fear. When I look back on some of these early resting places... I can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today."⁵

⁴ Matthew 6:12.

⁵ Lamott, Anne. Traveling Mercies (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 3.

Never forget this truth: very often there are people who enter the doors of a church who are themselves most surprised to be here. Perhaps they are fragile. Perhaps they are already broken, their life shattered beyond repair.

Anne Lamott went on to find her way to a Presbyterian Church quite by accident. She stumbled upon the Sanctuary in the midst of a flea market. Every month or so she would make her way back to that Church and stand in their doorway. The music was compelling, the people so very kind; but she didn't want to be preached at. So when the sermon began, she would seek refuge in the market. Eventually she did make her way through that intimidating but open door. In retrospect, she had this to say, "When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me to hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of *home* – that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'"⁶

That's an interesting image, isn't it? The church as a home, home not only for those of us who are here, but for others may happen upon us, perhaps even by accident.

Ann Lamott borrows this image from a very famous poem by Robert Frost, "Death of a Hired Hand." Frost tells of a moment when Silas, a hired hand, returns to Mary and Warren, his former employers. Silas had left in a dispute over money. Warren, still angered by the fact that Silas had left, was not pleased by this homecoming.

"...I'll not have the fellow back, he said.
"I told him so last haying, didn't I? 'If he left then,' I said, 'that ended it.'
What good is he? Who else will harbor him?
At his age for the little he can do?"

In the course of their dialogue, Mary and Warren acknowledge that Silas had come home to their house to die. This then raised the question of "what you mean by home."

On this Warren concluded:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in."

Mary added:

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

⁶ Lamott, p. 100.

In this poetic narrative, Robert Frost illustrates two important Biblical principals of home. First, home is in fact the place that will take you in. The church is to take in all who come to this place because that is simply part of our job. Second, home is also something that you need not to deserve. A place in this home is not something that any of us are able to earn or to deserve. We acknowledge this each Sunday with our Prayer of Confession. But, just as we confess our sin, we acknowledge God's forgiveness as well.

The Church and the Call to Welcome Others

The letter to the Romans is quite clear: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."⁷

Make no mistake about it, the church is called clearly and loudly to be a home for many people. The letter to the Romans is unambiguous; "Welcome one another... just as Christ has welcomed you, [do this] for the glory of God."

We are to go through those doors and to seek out those who are in need of God's great love. We are to invite them and to welcome them. And it doesn't hurt when we add, "Y'all come back now."

But, all too often the church, as a whole, is perceived as skipping over the sincere welcome and as moving immediately to hard words of condemnation. Please forgive me for this little diatribe. About two months ago I had surgery on my back. I spent the next four weeks in bed. I have seen many, many televised sermons. I have watched far too many televised preachers speaking about those people out there in the world – the ones who are to be feared; the ones who are to be avoided. Rarely did I hear about the ones who are to be welcomed just as Christ has welcomed you.

Make no mistake about it, the church is called clearly and loudly to uphold certain standards and principals. From this we cannot escape. Nor should we ever attempt to do so. The church must never turn its back to the responsibility to proclaim God's truth. But, among God's great truth is this: You are to "welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

The importance of the sanctuary's door cannot be overstated. More important than either pulpit or pew, it is greater than the beautiful artwork that adorns the building – the stained glass, the carved wood, even the gilded chandeliers.

Remember always the importance of the sanctuary door. Through these doors the people of God gather to worship, to pray, to praise and to sing. Through these same doors the people of God go out into the world to serve as ambassadors of Christ.

⁷ Romans 15:8.

Through these doors into the church there come others. Some come to satisfy a curiosity. Indeed, some will certainly look upon us much like they would look upon a museum exhibit. Let them come. There will be others, others who will come seeking sanctuary, safety and protection from the worldly concerns that weigh so heavily upon their souls.

If we refuse to welcome them home, where then shall they go?

If we fail to welcome them home, where else could they go?