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Sunday's Sermon

The Truth About Tolerance

Matthew 5:43-48 and Romans 14:1-13

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

Our culture says "Anything goes." But, is that really true? Don't we make choices all the time? For example, there is an old story of a visiting admiral chatting on the deck of a U.S. Navy ship with some enlisted men.

"What would you do if another sailor fell overboard?"

A sailor promptly replied, "I would raise the alarm and toss a life preserver, sir."

The admiral asked a second question, "What would you do if it were an officer?"

At this, the sailor paused and thought before answering, "Which one, sir?"

We choose which ones we save, which ones we love, which ones we welcome. The apostle Paul, in this week's passage from Romans, says that God changes all that.

ABC network news once devoted a few of its precious prime-time minutes to what was judged to be some radical news. It seems that Christian rock in all its pop, grunge, rap and heavy-metal incarnations had been making significant inroads on the secular music charts and music scene at the time. The newscasters appeared to be both slightly horrified and mildly amused that these "rockers for Christ" had become a popular tributary flowing into the vast American music scene. As usual, the network reporters seemed to be looking for some "dirt" to dish. But the rockers interviewed, whatever their personal style of music, responded to the investigation by voicing surprisingly similar hopes and concerns.

Every one of them claimed allegiance to Christ. They witnessed to presenting an honest gospel message through their music. They expressed hope that it was this message, as well as the music, that brought out their fans. They candidly admitted that the usual rock scene was based on the often-outrageous personalities of band members. "It's an ego-center business," one rocker confessed. Avoiding the traps and lures of personal stardom rated high on everyone's list of concerns.

Yet, each and every one of those interviewed stressed that it was not personal popularity and success that their bands were after. The real goal, made more possible as a group's reputation grows, is to offer the Good News of Jesus Christ to Gen X, Millennials and younger kids searching for meaning, purpose, joy and justice in their lives.

Of course, scores of mainline/oldline/sideline churches across America find the whole concept of "Christian rock" an oxymoron. These churches range from ultraconservative churches who deem the rock scene beyond all hope of redemption to theologically liberal congregations who for whatever reason find rock too distasteful for their sanctuaries, that they choose to first assign and then second, to abandon it to high-decibel secularism.

It is easy to find examples of music that are unacceptable, "not our kind" or beyond the pale. But the church cannot fall back on this kind of attitude. We are not given the luxury of cordoning off whole segments of society and judging them not worthy of our attention. Sadly, the church has often

gained a reputation for doing just that. In most surveys, when people were asked their top reason for not attending church, they declared it was “because the church is filled with judgmental people.”

What have we done? How have we so blurred people’s vision of the body of Christ? If there is any gathered community that knows it has no claim to judge others, it is the Christ-body community. The church lives and breathes and has its being only because of the existence of unmerited grace and unmitigated love. Do we not somehow manage to convey a judgmental image ...

- when a church service is geared only toward one generation and its needs?
- when a congregation’s continued existence is based on the physical beauty of its building, instead of the vital life of its faith?
- when sermons focus on what we must do to belong, instead of what Christ has done to accept us?
- when we are more concerned with lifestyles than with broken hearts?
- when we are more interested in a perfect performance than in a heartfelt faith?
- when political alliances are deemed issues of divine importance instead of a Christian’s civic engagement?

Like aroma in the air, all of these attitudes can seep. They can seep out of our spirits, out of the sanctuary and gradually saturate both our people and our church building with a judgmental nature. My Friends in Christ, we know it is not a very inviting smell.

In Paul’s message to the Romans this week, he cautions people of faith to accept one another’s differences and minister to one another’s needs. To those bickering over issues of diet and Sabbath observance, Paul suggests this: Since God, their common Master, has seen fit to accept both types of believers as true servants of Christ, then perhaps they should find it in themselves to do the same.

Let us be clear: Paul is not suggesting that “anything goes.” The list of reprehensible actions and attitudes Paul cites early on in his letter (Romans 1:29-31) draws some stiff lines between right and wrong behavior. The key for Paul is whether an individual is genuinely striving to honor God through his or her actions. Though some of our actions (like our preference for Christian music) may be questionable to others, if they are performed with a thankful heart turned toward Jesus Christ, others must simply learn to live with them. Just because we find someone else’s behavior or convictions unfamiliar or uncomfortable, it doesn’t mean that they are wrong.

Our natural human tendency is to homogenize our surroundings and our acquaintances so that they are virtually indistinguishable from ourselves. But this is not a healthy environment for a body of Christ. In order to remain fit, we’ve got to stretch and grow, reaching out to and welcoming all God’s children home to Christ even those we dislike and find distasteful.

While walking along a street with one of his disciples, a sage met his rival. The sage politely greeted his rival, but the other sage arrogantly disregarded the greeting. The sage’s young disciple was furious, condemning the ostentatious behavior of the rival sage.

Waiting for a while, the sage asked his disciple a question: “Are you angry at a person with an ugly face?”

“No,” replied his disciple.

“Then, why are you angry at a person with an ugly heart?” the sage calmly reasoned.

The truth about tolerance is that any celebration of diversity or tolerance needs to acknowledge that neither of these words means that there are no standards or boundaries. God's Word assumes there will be differences of opinion in the church. Differences should not be feared or avoided, but accepted and handled with the love and witness of Christ. In a spiritually healthy congregation like ours, we don't expect everyone to agree on every subject. In a spiritually healthy, generationally, socioeconomically, and ethnically diverse congregation like ours, differences of opinion need not cause division. They are sources of learning and richness in our relationships, which when submitted to Jesus Christ will help us understand our Bibles more faithfully and express our relationship with Jesus Christ more vibrantly.

Friends, it has always been so, but perhaps our time right now, is even more pressing for us to witness to Christ's grace and salvation by demonstrating radical inclusivity and welcome. Why is this so on my heart? Because, our communities, nation and world are beleaguered by persistent evil and sinful patterns of oppression, racism, bigotry and violence. We're moving into the fall season with images of Charlottesville still fresh in our memories. Concerns about immigration policy, war on the Korean Peninsula, the ravages of hurricanes, earthquakes and fires, and the sorry state of political discourse in our country is serving to create stress and anxiety among our communities... our family members...our classmates...our co-workers...our neighbors. And we have a very different story to share.

We are being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. They desperately need to know they're welcome here, with us, with all of their differences.

Pastor Robyn has drawn inspiration for this message from:

NIV Life Application Bible

The Upper Room devotional

Sermons.com illustrations

Commentary on Romans by Mike Bullard

Mind & Heart online newsletter by Whitworth University President, Dr. Beck Taylor