

Sermon for September 24, 2017

Romans 15:1-11

Building Up the Neighbor

The Reverend Roger Pancost

Samuel Well's, who has served as a pastor in England for many years, shares this poignant story, "Twenty-three years ago, when I was in my first pastoral appointment, there was an 11-year-old boy who started coming to my church at the suggestion of a teacher at the middle school. He was an isolated, disconsolate figure, who didn't mix easily and took a greedy share of the cookies after worship. After he had been coming a few months, funds were found for him to participate in a parish weekend retreat.

By Saturday morning, the complaints were raining down. He was rude. He was grabbing food. He was bullying the younger children. The adults finally had to talk to each other about it; it was one of those parish conversations where the pastor doesn't get a casting vote. The teacher through whose influence the boy had first come to church pointed out that, being brought up solely by his young and temperamental father, he was a troubled boy looking for security. Allowances were made, patience was maintained, and gradually the lad began to find his feet.

Nine months later at a special evening service he was baptized. His father was not there. His mother and brother, living across town, weren't there either. But about 40 people were and each member of the congregation was invited to describe what they most valued about being members of that church. One said friendship, another said acceptance, a third said trust. When the boy was asked the same question his narrow, fixed frown broke, for once, into a smile, and he replied, "You didn't throw me out after that weekend." (Christian Century, September 13, 2017, p. 35)

I share this story because it offers a beautiful example of what the Apostle Paul is speaking about in this morning's reading from Romans. In this section of Romans, in which Paul has been encouraging the members of the church to live in unity with each other, he states, "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor."

Paul is reminding the people in Rome that one of the responsibilities of being a member of a church is helping to build other people up. Sometimes this means setting aside your own needs in order to lift up someone who is having difficulties.

In the story shared by Pastor Samuel Wells, we hear about a congregation that works together to build up a young man who came to them from a troubled background. Despite his difficult behavior, the church folk continue to include him in the life of the church...going so far as to pay for him to attend a retreat. As Paul encourages, the people who are strong, put aside their own needs in order to help someone who is weak.

This story about a church welcoming a young boy offers insights into how we can help to build up our neighbors: It involves recognizing that each person who enters a church has his or her life-story. No one can know what that individual has been through, including the traumas he or she may have experienced. In the case of the young man in the story, people in the church eventually learned more about his circumstances. This knowledge led to greater compassion for him.

When we learn more about another person's circumstances, we will be led to have greater compassion. Such awareness can only occur when we take the time to truly listen to another person. It also involves not being too quick to judge another person.

Although Pastor Wells never mentions forgiveness specifically, forgiveness is an important element in this story. Despite the fact that the young man has done things that other people find disturbing, the congregation gives him another chance by inviting him to attend a retreat. With patience, they continue to reach out to him. Sometimes we are called to be forgiving of one another as well. With openness and patience, we work to develop lasting relationships.

It is interesting to note that when the members of Pastor Well's church were asked what they value about being a member of the church, individuals responded by saying, friendship, acceptance, and trust. The church can provide a safe environment in which to foster these three things.

Many years later Pastor Wells learned how important the care of the church was in the life of one young man. He shares that he recently received an email that began, "I'm the boy from that weekend." Through email exchanges Pastor Wells

learned that things had turned out well for the young man and that he was in a healthy relationship and was working at a bank.

A month after receiving that first email Pastor Wells had the opportunity to meet with him in person. Pastor Wells shares that at that meeting the man lovingly opened a back-pack and brought out a scrapbook. As he turned to the middle section he pointed to a letter. Pastor Wells immediately recognized his wife's handwriting. Years ago she had collected for the young man the autographs of the players from his favorite professional soccer team. It was a treasure he had kept throughout all of the moves in his life.

Pastor Wells writes, "Out of the ruins and rubble of a neglected and deprived childhood, here he held this precious document, like an epistle of hope from the caverns of exile. A gesture of kindness is never wasted...Here was this gentleman, whose life had emerged from chaos, and who showed me it's possible to live without bitterness. He didn't have a bad word for anyone." (Christian Century, September 13, 2017, p. 35)

Pastor Well's experience reminds us that we don't always know what positive impact we have when we reach out to build up another person. And, that support can come from something as simple as a written note of encouragement.

This past Wednesday, at the conclusion of our 12:30pm Bible Study, I invited the participants to take a reflection question home with them. The question I offered is this, "Who in the church might be in need of support or encouragement?"

I ask the same question of all of us this morning. Who might be going through a difficult time and need support? Who might be trying something new and need encouragement? Who might be feeling lonely or afraid and need companionship? Who might be experiencing difficulty with self-esteem and need a compliment?

Every single person in the church, no matter his or her age, can benefit from support and encouragement. Every single person in the church, no matter his or her age, has the ability to offer support and encouragement.

When we build one another up we not only help each other, we make the church stronger, and when we make the church stronger we glorify God, who loves all people...including troubled eleven-year-old boys.