

When I was a rising high school senior, I visited Germany with other high school students. One of the places we visited was the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. I was fascinated by the art students there. All over the museum budding artists had set up their canvasses and easels and were recreating the masters – Durer, Rubens, Elsheimer, Rembrandt, Da Vinci. I thought to myself, what a way to learn your craft – directly from the masters themselves.

As a person who uses words as their palette, I've applied that technique on occasion. You might remember my doubting Thomas sermon set to the rhyme and meter of Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who*. I did a similar sermon one Christmas morning as I borrowed the good Rev'd Clement Clarke Moore's poem *'Twas the Night before Christmas*. I've done one to Poe's "The Raven" – but I haven't shared that one with you.....yet. When I read the excerpt from Paul's letter to the Romans, I have to wonder what it might sound like if I were writing it instead of Paul.

Now, don't get me wrong, the letter to the Romans is most likely Paul's last letter and, therefore, reflects the faith of someone who has been around, someone who has worked on his theology for many decades. But then, heck, so have I! Starting a letter to Redeemer in the style of the apostle Paul does require some understanding of what Paul was up to in the first place.

Paul writes to the Romans to introduce himself, affirm his reputation, and bestow fatherly and apostolic advice to the new community in that city. In this section of the letter, he is continuing the thought process of what we heard last week: that there is diversity of gifts in Christian community. No one holds a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. Every person, every gift, is valuable.

To live in Christian community, then, requires a certain agreement on how to appreciate each other and honor each other's gifts. This isn't unlike what we do in the first session of every Education for Ministry year. It's important to agree on how we will live with each other. It not only sets the ground rules, but also serves as a reference when we need to hold each other accountable. The difference

between the covenant we make in EfM and the covenant that Paul proposes is that EfM seems a lot more doable.

Roman Christians had just been allowed back into the city after the murder of Claudius. They were meeting up with Jewish Christians, who had very different ideas of how to go about living into the faith. Paul needed to provide wisdom at the same time he needed to acknowledge the tension that was inherent in these two different points of view. It was imperative that the people holding differing views be able to function as the body of Christ within their own community if they were to have any possibility of functioning that way in the world.

Thus, Paul defines Christian community as the place where followers of Jesus practice unhypocritical love, an ethic of peace, and radical hospitality.

So, what would this disciple, sent by God to Bethesda, Maryland, say to her community, in the style of Paul the apostle? It would go like this:

To the church called Redeemer, in the city called “House of Mercy”, to all the beloved of God there called to be saints, grace to you and peace.

I give thanks for your faith and hospitality as it proclaims the gospel of Christ Jesus to the neighborhood around you. I remember you always in my prayers.

I want you to know that I have heard and seen the diversity among you. You each are unique in how you have come to this place. For some it was sanctuary from a place that no longer gave you spiritual comfort. For some it was a compromise between evangelical and liturgical upbringings. For others, the music lured you here. However you have come, I rejoice that you have made Redeemer your home.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to quickly understand that while there is some general understanding on how we are to follow Jesus, there are a variety of opinions regarding how we actually do it. This tension has the potential of tearing us apart. That, my friends, is not what we are called to do.

Living in community means accepting a certain amount of tension and ambiguity. This can be – usually is – uncomfortable albeit necessary. To each of you belongs gifts given to you by the Spirit. No one has all the gifts, all the time, which is why we must support each other in our mutual journey. This requires that we park our egos and personal needs at the door and focus on the common good and how best we can tell the story of salvation.

When we invite or welcome people to Redeemer, we do so knowing that the fabric of our community must be ‘stretchy’ enough to make room for all of who they are. It must also stretch enough for us to be changed by them.

Remember that your words can hurt as well as comfort. If someone upsets you or hurts you, be brave enough to talk with them directly. By doing so, you honor the dignity of their humanness. I know that the impulse for revenge and retribution is strong. We witness its power every day. We must be different. We must be the City on the Hill. We must model Christianity by how we love each other – first here, then in our families, then in the world.

The letter written by Paul to the Romans is easily confused as a way Christians should behave in the world. Ideally, this would be true. But, Paul knew (as do all of us) that that is much more easily said than done. Therefore, we start here. . . here at Redeemer in the City of Mercy. Here we practice the faith, repenting when necessary, until our lives are transformed by it. That is when we are completely able to pick up the cross and follow Jesus.

Amen.