

2nd Sunday in Advent – Year A – December 5, 2010 – Faith Lutheran Church – Radcliff, KY

Based on Romans 15:4-13 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Sing in Harmony!”

This is a copy of *The Lutheran Hymnal*, published in 1941. This is the hymnal that many of us grew up with. And then in 1993 our Wisconsin Synod published this new hymnal, *Christian Worship*. Omitting the thee’s and thou’s, introducing new hymns while retaining many of the rich standard Lutheran hymns with new arrangements, and inserting new tunes to the liturgy. It’s been 17 years since this hymnal was introduced into our synod. Did you know that there are some Lutheran congregations that still use this old blue hymnal? Did you know that some church members have actually transferred their membership because their home congregation chose to switch to the new *Christian Worship* hymnal? It sounds silly, but people have different opinions on worship.

Thankfully, worship falls under what we call *adiaphora*. *Adiaphora* are things pertaining to Christian living which God has neither commanded nor forbidden. God has not told us which forms or music to use in public worship. The Bible does give us some examples. Throughout the history of the church we have observed that when God’s people gather together for public worship they included the reading of Scripture, singing of psalms and other hymns, prayers, and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. I think it’s safe to say that all of us would agree that these elements ought to be used in our worship today. I think it’s also safe to say that many of us here this morning might have different ideas of which forms and music to use. Although we may have different opinions on worship, we will all agree that our hymns, prayers, psalms and liturgies all proclaim the story of God’s love and justification through faith in Christ Jesus.

Our lesson this morning is from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Christian congregation in Rome. This particular parish was comprised of two groups: Jews who had converted to Christianity and the non-Jewish believers, the Gentiles. Among the believers there were disputes over matters of *adiaphora*. One of the issues was with worship. When the Jews were under the Old Testament law, the LORD required them to worship on Saturday. Since Christ had come and fulfilled the laws and ceremonies, the regulations concerning the commandment were no longer binding. They were free to worship on any day of the week. The Jews understood the full implication of this freedom, but it took a while for them to change their habits.

The Gentiles on the other hand had been taking full advantage of their Christian freedom. They looked down at the Jew who was hesitant to worship on Sunday, considered him a spiritual wimp. The Jew on the other hand looked disapprovingly at the Gentile, “He shouldn’t be doing that! Worship on Saturday is ceremonially approved, and is more God-pleasing!” This was a source of tension among the Christians in Rome. They were sitting in same church, each singing a different tune. And you might think, “Well, what’s the big deal?” The real problem was that each party was judging each other, claiming that the other was sinning because of their actions. Satan was using this division to tear the congregation apart.

Well, as far as I know, there is no large scale conflict among us. And for that we can be thankful. But, like every Christian congregation, ours is comprised of sinners, such as you and me. There are divisions among us on a personal level. Someone annoys you —we just don’t talk to them. Someone makes you uncomfortable because you’ve had a confrontation with them in the past—well, we won’t be sitting on the same side of church they sit on. Someone doesn’t live up to their promises and expectations – so you tuck your anger and frustration away in your heart. There are folks here today who know personally what it’s like when someone you thought was your friend no longer accepts you as worthy of friendship. There is at least one person here who wonders why only certain people seem to have the time of day for them.

Yes even in this church which we call a family, there is dissonance. One individual is singing from the blue hymnal, another from the red hymnal, and still another makes up their own tune. We do not always accept each another for who we are. The Bible calls that sin. And if left unchecked and impenitent, it will lead us all to the fires of hell. That's how serious this one sin is.

These sinful divisions keep us from the unity that Paul talks about in his letter, and that's exactly the way the devil wants it. "If I can just get them to divide up into groups, my job is done. If I can tear them apart from one another, eventually they will bicker and fight. They will harbor jealousies and keep secret grudges. They'll team up against one another and their sin will bloom into outright hatred and they bite each other so much that in the end they'll devour themselves." He'll use something as simple as a hymnal, personality conflicts, the choosing of colors for a wall in a new building project to accomplish his goal.

How can we set aside differences so that the devil will not stick his foot in the door? Now, we would never compromise on doctrine. God's Word dictates what we believe. How do we set aside differences of opinion in the church? How do we practice patience and set aside anger? How can we stop sinning? How do we get everybody singing from the same sheet of music? That's what God wants! Paul wrote, "**Accept one another... in order to bring praise to God.**" (vs7)

Paul explains, "**Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.**" (vs7) The Jews and the Gentiles had their differences causing disharmony. Paul points out that Christ accepted both of them, and served both parties. Although the Jews were chosen by God to be the nation that would produce the Savior of the world, the Gentiles had put part of that plan all along. Paul quotes four Old Testament passages to prove that God had promised salvation to both the Gentiles and Jews alike.

Whether you are tall or short, fat or skinny, beautiful or funny looking, dark or light, old or young, whether you prefer Bach chorales or Christian contemporary music Jesus accepted you all. Jesus accepted you even though you and I are all sinners. Even though you and I are guilty of gossip, anger, jealousy, grudges and all sorts of disharmony, He accepted you, and he showed it. He poured out his blood from the cross to wash you clean from the sinful refusal to love and accept one another. Christ's death was the most beautiful song in God's ears. When he heard his Son cry out, "It is finished!" He knew that his Son's death paid for your sins. Jesus' death has brought harmony between you and God. Through faith in Christ's death, you have been given the gift to sing with the choirs of heaven for all eternity.

His Son's death has made you all one with each other. You are all united by one baptism, one death, one resurrection, one faith in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Since we are united in faith we will strive for unity among each other. This harmony among us cannot be established by passing a policy. It cannot be mandated or demanded by the pastor. We cannot bring harmony into the congregation by making everyone happy with every decision that is made. This harmony comes as a gift from God. Paul writes, "**May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves.**" (vs5) That's what we want, unity! How does God give us this gift? Paul says it right here, "**Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.**" (vs4) Every time we read, study and learn the Scriptures at home and at church, God encourages us by reminding us that he has accepted us. Every time we participate in the Lord's Supper (where Christ's body and blood are perfectly united with this bread and wine) God reminds us that he has accepted us. Whenever we witness a baptism (where God's Word perfectly unites with water), God reassures us that he accepted us because through baptism he gave us the gift of faith. Through these Means, God reminds us that

we are one in faith, one in the hope of eternal life. This encourages us to accept one another, to sing from the same hymnal.

Paul makes our purpose clear, “**so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**” (vs6) Since we will join our voices to sing together in the choirs of heaven, we join together to sing in harmony here on earth. We will no longer gossip. We will no longer put each other down. We will accept that former friend back into our lives. We will be patient with those who disappoint us. We will work with those who have differing opinions about how the church should operate. We will work patiently to train and equip those who are eager to work for the Lord at this congregation. We will be patient with each other through the building project. We will forgive, love and accept each other as saints, as brothers and sisters in Christ, who have been washed with the blood of the Lamb. By doing this we will be singing from the same hymnal, and we will be kicking the devil out of our church, and bringing glory to God, for God is pleased when we live in harmony with each other.

Look at the front of your hymnal. I’m sure you’ve looked at it hundreds of times over the years and maybe never paid attention to the symbol on the front. Open to the third page, just before the Contents. It explains, “The logo for this hymnal is a version of the Chi-Ro, a symbol for Christ. In the Greek language these are the first letters of the name of Christ. He is the center of our faith and worship, our prayers, our praise and thanksgiving. This hymnal reflects in its name, logo, liturgies and hymns, the story of God’s love and salvation in Christ.” Whether we prefer *MercyMe* or Mendelssohn, drums and guitar or a pipe organ, chanting monks or a swingin’ gospel choir, we gather for worship united in one Lord Jesus Christ, and our worship is always focused on him who united us to himself and to each other, so that we might sing in harmony.

I’ll close today with St. Paul’s prayer for God’s people who are striving to sing in harmony in the Body of Christ: **May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.** May God grant that among us, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.