**Walking Together Sunday – June 23, 2013 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Romans 15:4-6 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Let Us Have a Spirit of Unity in Christ Alone**

**I. Strengthened by Scripture’s Blessings**

**II. Intended to Glorify God**

*For 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. 5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity* *among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify* *the God and Father* *of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

In her book “Team of Rivals” historian Doris Goodwin focuses on our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln. Goodwin makes the case for Lincoln’s political genius by examining his relationships with three men he selected for his cabinet, all of whom were opponents for the Republican nomination in 1860. These men, nationally known, all accomplished men, very presidential, were humiliated that this backwoods hick lawyer from Illinois, who had no experience, beat them. Yet Lincoln convinced these men to be on his presidential cabinet. As difficult as that was, Lincoln turned rivals into allies, all for the sake of the greater good of the nation.

Let’s imagine that you are the head of a committee here at church. How many of you would be willing to choose rivals, people with whom you butt heads on a regular basis, to serve on your committee? Why is that so difficult to work with people, even in the church, with whose opinion we seldom agree? Is it possible to have unity in the congregation with so many diverse opinions and backgrounds? The Apostle Paul shares some thoughts on this in our lesson from his letter to the Romans, chapter 15.

I. Strengthened by Scripture’s Blessings (vs.4-5)

vs4 – The first word is important, “For…” Paul is about to make a point building on what he had just written. vs1 **“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.”** “**We who are strong**” are the Christians who are strong in faith, the more mature Christians, who have a deeper understanding of Scripture and of how God wants them to live as Christians. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome to instruct them how they, the strong, deal with the weak - the newer Christians, new adult members in the church, whose understanding and knowledge of Scripture and how a congregation works might not be on the same level as the seasoned veteran Christian.

In our lesson he told the Christians in Rome that Scripture taught them how to deal with the weak, “**Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us**.” So Paul quoted something from the past, Psalm 69:9, vs3 **“For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’”** Jesus was willing to go so far as be insulted by other people so he could serve and save more people. His ministry wasn’t about what was convenient or easier for him. He would do whatever it took to reach those lost souls, so that he might save them.

Paul’s point was that the stronger Christian’s attitude will be the same as Christ’s: they will be service-minded Christians, Christians who think about how they can serve their brothers and sisters rather than serving themselves. The congregation in Rome had some issues to work out between the strong and weak members.

Paul had said a lot in the previous chapter about Christians who had different opinions about matters of adiaphora. Matters of adiaphora are things that God has neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. In the church in Rome matters of adiaphora included whether or not to eat kosher, worshiping on Sunday rather than Saturday. God, in the New Testament, told Jews that they did not have to eat kosher anymore. They were also free to go to church on whatever day they pleased. When Jews converted to Christianity, they had a difficult time giving up those old traditions and customs. For the more mature Christians, Paul had to remind them to show love to the weaker brother or sister whose conscience did not yet allow them to do those things. Oftentimes being patient takes a lot of work with someone who doesn’t quite “get it” yet.

So Paul offered more guidance, **“…so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”** (vs4) When they studied their Bibles, God would bless them with endurance: the ability to serve their Christian brothers and sisters, not just for a little while, but over the long haul. As God developed the members of the church with the virtue of endurance, he would also bless them with hope, the confidence that there will be an end to the difficult times.

As the congregation in Rome grew in their understanding of Scripture God would bless the members of the church **with a spirit of unity** (vs5); literally, they would think the same way. Even if Christians disagreed on matters of adiaphora, God would cause them to think the same way, the same way Christ thought and acted, with a heart bent on serving serve others.

What would Paul write to our congregation? What matters of adiaphora would he instruct us on? Certainly the day on which we worship or what kinds of meats to serve at the potluck are not matters of adiaphora we deal with today. For us 21st century Christians we wrestle with these things: how to do ministry in a congregation, what style of music to use in worship, how to build a new church or expand an existing facility, how to spend the offerings or where to set the offering plates. For some of us we have known “how to do church” only one way. When we’ve been “doing church” that way for so long, and the mere mention of change tickles our ears, we bristle and quickly busy our arms to build a wall around what we’ve known and loved… to protect familiarity.

What about the newer Christians? What if they are more comfortable with more contemporary hymns? How would you feel if we found more contemporary style hymns without sacrificing content, even if they aren’t our favorite style of music? How would you feel? Could we recognize that there will as many opinions in this congregation as there are nails in the roof and that my opinion may not be the best for God’s kingdom? Could it be that when I use my talents and time that it may not always be convenient for me? Could it be that sometimes, too many times, we get ourselves caught up in arguments about little things, that we forget why we’re here, who we are and what we’re all about?

Our struggle, it seems, is not so much with other people whose opinions are different, but with ourselves and with God. There’s a part of all of us that wants so badly to think of ourselves first. There’s a part of us that wants so badly not to listen to God and what he wants us to do, or to protest to him that it’s too difficult to serve others first. When we do that… then we are not thinking the same way Christ thinks. Then we are in danger of losing that spirit of unity and who we are - in Christ alone. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “Your sins have separated you from your God.” We are in danger of losing our unity with our Heavenly Father.

Memorial Day is not in the too distant past. In keeping with the Fort Knox tradition, this year’s ceremony honored the memory of a fallen Soldier. That Soldier was PFC David Nash of Daviess County, Kentucky, a Medal of Honor recipient who served with 39th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division. While serving on an ambush patrol on Dec. 29, 1968, in Vietnam, Nash made the ultimate sacrifice when the 20-year old rolled onto an exploding grenade, sacrificing his life to save three fellow Soldiers.

It isn’t easy to live an unselfish life of service, to think about others first and their needs, especially when it comes at a cost. But we have one who has done that for us. Jesus said to his disciples, **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** Was it convenient for Jesus to leave the comforts and luxuries of heaven, no pain, hunger, thirst, no threat of enemy, to leave that home, to take on a human body that was susceptible to all of the hardships of human life? Was it convenient for him to set aside his powers and rather use them for his own benefit and comfort, to help others instead? Was it convenient for him to lay down on the grenade of our sins, allowing it to explode in his soul, be riddled with the pain of God’s wrath and hell’s fury, and die? That was the cost of our sins - our selfishness, our petty differences, our complaints, our pride – Christ’s very life.

But that’s what Christ Jesus came to do, that by his life and death, we, who believe in him, will not die, but live. That we not be ripped away from our Father because of our sins, but remain connected to him through his love and forgiveness. And the Father’s love and forgiveness for us is something that will not change, because of Christ and his sacrifice. That’s something special you share with your brothers and sisters in Christ – you are united in Christ alone by faith alone. You are all forgiven in Christ alone. You are all going to heaven in Christ alone.

This unity is built on Christ Jesus alone and everything he said and stands for. This unity means that one thing does not change within the church –the gospel, the good news of Jesus, and all of our beliefs and teachings which are formed and grounded in God’s Word, the Bible.

The more we learn from the Bible, God promises that he will bless us with encouragement, endurance, and hope. God will bless us with a spirit of unity within our congregation. The more we allow the Scriptures to teach us about the unity we have in Christ, then we will realize that some things will change – our attitudes and the way we deal with each other. This unity means a willingness to serve others, and that may mean stepping out of our comfort zone, doing things that may not always be convenient for me. And maybe it’s not the way we’ve always done things, but that’s ok, because we know that this church, God’s church, is not about me, it’s not about what I’m used to, it’s all about Jesus and how we will walk together.

That’s what makes the WELS unique, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. That’s the church body we belong to. So when people ask you, “What is Lutheran? What makes you different from the other flavors of Lutheran?” You don’t have to be able to explain the differences between synods. You can tell them that we walk together as the Wisconsin Synod. We are a body of believers whose pastors all around the world get into their pulpits every Sunday and preach the same doctrinal truths, whose Sundays school teachers and Christian day school teachers teach the same doctrinal truths, who college professors in New Ulm, MN and professors at WLS in Mequon, WI teach future pastors and teachers the same doctrinal truths of Scripture. We’re a part of something larger than Faith Lutheran in Radcliff. That’s what Paul was talking about in vs6.

II. Intended to Glorify God

**“With one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** When God helps people to think the same way, the way Christ Jesus thinks, then the will of their hearts and the words of their mouths will be the same. They will be a body of believers without divisions, and their unity will be apparent to all people.

When Christians receive from God this spirit of unity, when they think together and with Jesus, then they will give glory to God the Father. This unity we have in Christ alone moves us to glorify God the Father, and not ourselves. What an amazing privilege we have to praise and glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with our hymns and psalms, with our prayers and offerings and service to others!

To that end we pray, “Father in heaven, let us walk together, in a spirit of unity in Christ alone! Amen!”