

KNOW GREATER LOVE, PART II

Sermon, February 7, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 40:28-31, Romans 14:1-10, 15:1-7 (I Corinthians 8)

As mentioned during the Time With the Children, I like to think of “waiting” (as in “those who wait upon the Lord” expressed in Isaiah 40:31) in terms of a waiter at a restaurant. In this sense, to wait upon someone is to actively engage with and serve that person! A good waiter gives his or her customer excellent care and attention by checking in often, learning their desires, attending to them, engaging them, serving them. Waiters are not idly sitting by; they are active ... clearing and setting tables, running back and forth to the kitchen, dealing with chefs, memorizing menus, dealing with finicky customers (and often multiple finicky customers) and so on. “Waiting upon” implies action, it implies working and engaged and proactive attentiveness to the desires and wishes of the one being waited upon; “waiting upon” is an active, serving, attentive, disciplined, skilled kind of waiting, not the “wait for something” kind of waiting. The “wait for something” waiting implies passivity, sitting back and doing nothing while being served or while you wait for something to happen. If you ever wondered why the waiter is called a waiter when it’s the customer who waits, well, there it is! The short answer is there are two kinds of waiting, one very active making things happen, and one somewhat idly passive, waiting for someone else to make things happen. To put it another way, “waiting upon” implies action, it implies working and engaged and proactive attentiveness to the desires and wishes of the one being waited upon; it is not the “sitting around hoping” kind of waiting. The prophet Isaiah is talking about actively “waiting upon the Lord” with active words like “soaring” and “run” and “walk”, and with the end result of the waiting being your “gaining new strength” ... which, by the way, you don’t get by sitting around waiting letting others serve you! You must exercise and move to gain new strength; your body is weakened by sitting around and doing nothing, it is not energized.

A mark of Christian maturity is when we realize God is not our celestial Waiter awaiting our beck and call to serve us, but that we are called to be the waiters, attentively awaiting His beck and call to serve and wait upon Him! This is how we renew and gain new strength. This is how we are lifted to loftier heights with wings like eagles. This is how we run through life and not get weary. This is how we may walk through adversity without fainting and falling apart. Classic Christianity has always been about God endowing His people with good gifts, uplifting gifts, and God delighting in seeing His people use and enjoy and exercise and grow their gifts ... as they learn to wait upon Him and, I think Paul would add, as they learn to wait upon and serve each other!

In the selections from these letters to the church in Rome and the church in Corinth, Paul is writing to two different churches about how to live in harmony with each other, how to “wait upon” each other with honor, respect, kindness and love. Just as a bit of a clarification/aside, harmony is not conformity. Harmony isn’t about making all the “notes” exactly the same. As in music, harmony is found when complex and disparate and unique instruments and notes and voices are brought into harmonious relationship; the more complex and diverse the elements being brought into unity, the more beautiful is the harmony. True harmony pleases not only the ear, but it goes to our very heart and soul ... uplifting, comforting, soothing. Edgar Allen Poe once wrote: “Dissonance, discord, chaos ... these things are naturally displeasing to the soul. Harmony pleases, not just the ear, but the soul.” Conformity, however, is not harmony. Conformity is monotone. Conformity results in monotony. Conformity is dull. And, frankly, lifeless.

In Rome, there was a group of Christians, mostly Jewish converts, who believed all Christians really needed to follow the Jewish dietary laws. And they were troubled by the Gentile Christians who wouldn’t eat in accordance with those laws. In Corinth, as we talked about last week, there were some Christians who believed they should never eat food that had been sacrificed or dedicated to idols, pagan deities like Apollo and Athena.¹ Just as in Rome, where those sensitive to Jewish dietary laws were withdrawing from people who didn’t share their beliefs, the same thing was happening in Corinth over this meat issue ... where in addition to some of the practices mentioned last week, virtually all meat sold in the marketplace had probably been first dedicated to one of the pagan deities. Those sensitive to these issues may have been “majoring on minors”, but at the time and stage of their faith development, these were weighty matters for them.

Paul seems to be making a bit of a judgment call between who is weak and who is strong, which is really another sermon, but for now I’ll just note that in both chapters Paul is actually admonishing the strong, not the weak. What is implied is that they are not bearing with the weak, they are not being patient with the weak who

¹ The Athenian Deli on Oaklawn Avenue in Cranston comes to mind ... it really isn’t an issue for me to order a gyro from there, even though it is ostensibly named after the Greek “goddess” of wisdom Athena, a pagan deity. However, food coming from a server dedicated to Athena might have been problematic for some Christians in early Corinth!

have their very real fears and concerns and their lack of understanding about the extent of God's grace. The "strong" are having a hard time accepting the "weak." They were not tolerant of those who had overly sensitive consciences ... I can't help but note the irony it was the broadminded who were actually demonstrating intolerance.

Tolerance ... it's a word we hear a lot today. Some would even say the only moral absolute left is to insist no one's morals are absolute. *"I'm tolerant. I accept everything. Inclusion is good, exclusion is bad."* But so-called broadminded people can be pretty intolerant, too. They can be intolerant of intolerant people; at least people they think are intolerant. They're self-righteous about self-righteous people, judgmental of judgmental people ... disdainful, laughing at, looking down on, refusing to enter into relationship with any they think are bigoted or uneducated or inferior or weak. There are generally three ways people exhibit intolerance: **Expulsion, Subjugation and Assimilation**. Expulsion excludes by basically saying, *"Get away from me, don't come near me."* Subjugation excludes by basically saying, *"Get beneath me, we'll have the power around here and you won't."* Assimilation excludes by basically saying, *"Get to be just like me. We'd love to have a relation with you, but if you're going to part of us you have to be just like us. Don't you want to be just like us? After all, you're wrong, you know."* And before you know it, in the name of tolerance and assimilation and unity any dissension is banned, suppressed, censored, shut up, shut down. That's not unity, that's conformity. People who disagree are demonized, labeled dangerous, even seditious. There is no real unity, just suppression of difference. That's not harmony; that's monotony. That's not tolerance; that is subjugation disguised as tolerance. This is the "tolerance" that says *"Nobody has the truth; the only moral absolute is that nobody's morals are absolute. As long as we don't believe anything, we can live together. If you think you have the truth, you're dangerous, you're a threat, you're out of the club."* Then it just becomes simply about Power, not about virtue and/or what is right and/or living in harmony. As I've mentioned before, I'm worried this is an increasing trend in our nation. But there I go, getting into politics again.

Paul says, *"Let's go way beyond tolerance."* Paul says *"Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you. Romans 14:1 – Accept him whose faith is weak without quarreling over opinions."* Other translations have *"Without passing judgment on disputable matters. Other translations have, "without arguing over their political affiliation or pandemic views (not really on that last one, I made it up). Also, other translations have RECEIVE, or WELCOME, rather than "accept." (the Greek word is Proslambano ... "Pros" is the same prefix as used in the Gk word for "face"; the word intimates a pull towards you to a face to face, peer to peer, side by side relationship and acceptance..)* Accept him even if you think his opinions or dietary practices or political affiliations or clothes and hairstyles are all wrong. Enter into a relationship with someone, even if you're convinced they have some wrong opinions. And don't automatically think the worst of them or their motivations. Bear with what you perceive to be their weaknesses. It doesn't mean you become weak or that you become as immature as you may think they are; it implies those strong and mature in their faith should do what they can to understand the weakness(es) of the weak, to genuinely understand it, sympathize with it, figure out how the person got into it, see the advantages and the strengths of this person and his/her opinions, and even try to learn from this person how YOU can be better. God has a purpose in bringing such people into your life, a purpose that may just prove beneficial to you both!

And don't be like, *"You got all your hangups, you're so superstitious. You can eat that food, we know there is no Apollon or Athena or any of those false gods; get over it. I'm gonna eat what I'm going to eat and I'm going to do it right in front of you ... look at this, here in my hand I have an Athenian Deli Gyro, watch me eat it right in front of you... Gulp!"* No, adjust your life, even inconvenience your life. Adapt without compromising your integrity. Receive one another as Christ received you. **Paul doesn't say receive their beliefs; he says receive one another.** To be clear, we are not to be judgmental; however, we ARE to make judgments! We must discern between what is right and wrong, good and evil, and so on. In fact, not to make judgments can be a moral evil in itself. Knowledge is good, but how we harness that knowledge in love can make all the difference in waiting upon others and lifting others up. In short, be a neighbor. Be the best neighbor we can be. Be a friend.

I recently discovered a note in one of my late wife's journals -- *"A friend is one who knows you as you are, understands where you've been, accepts who you've become ... and in doing so, inspires you to grow."*

I close with this ... Four ways we can befriend someone with whom we may disagree: 1. We must be willing to take time and energy to understand the other. 2. We must be willing to change and adapt ourselves; in fact, good relationships do that. You can learn from other people, even from *(and perhaps especially from)* those whom you disagree. Who knows; you might change some of your own views and opinions. 3. We must expect to be misunderstood, misconstrued. Genuine understanding only comes with time, relationship, conversation and entering into the lives of each other. 4) Probably most importantly, honor the pace of God in their lives; allow His spirit to nurture genuine growth and understanding. Don't try to hurry it along. If you try to force a sapling to grow, you may wind up uprooting it.

Be a friend. After all, what a friend we have in Jesus, Who accepted us when we were radically different from Him. He radically and graciously adjusted His life to enter our individual worlds. So, accept one another as Christ has accepted you ... and together, let us wait upon the Lord.