

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA May 12, 2013

Church Fellowship sermon series – #4

Romans 16

A Prayer to the Lord about our Fellowship Practices

1. A prayer based on Paul's fellowship with the Romans
2. A prayer asking for our faithfulness

Hymns: "Two Future Vigils" – 530 – 566 –
Closing: 610

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Romans 16 –

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. 3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. 4 They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. 5 Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. 6 Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. 8 Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. 9 Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. 10 Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. 11 Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. 12 Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. 13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. 14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and

the brothers with them. 15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. 16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

21 Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives. 22 I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. 23 Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.

The time eventually comes when you need to do it. For example, a number of months ago I had to replace our dishwasher. It had run its course of a dishwasher's life, and I was not inclined to pay someone to install it. So after we purchased one, I pulled out the manual to check out installation instructions very carefully. Then I went on YouTube to watch a video on how to install it. It was all very helpful! I watched the video a couple times and reread the manual's instructions. Eventually, however, the time came that I had to break out the tools and actually do it!

That's the way it is with anything. The time comes for action. After the blueprints are finalized, the time comes to put a shovel into the ground. After the locker room talk, the time comes to go out and play the game.

This is the final sermon in a four-week series on **"Church Fellowship: Our Blessed Partnership in Christ."** In the first three sermons we have learned much:

- We've learned where "God's Church" is
- We've learned that fellowship begins in enhancing our own congregation's bonds of love, friendship, and ministry

- We've learned that our fellowship practices are motivated by love: Love for the Word of God, love for other people's souls, and love for our own faith, which needs to be fed by the pure Word
- And we've learned about the concept that we cannot give false impressions in our worship and religious practices with others

We have "watched a great deal of YouTube" on the subject, so to speak. In this final sermon in the series, we see an example in Scripture on exactly how to do this. Our model today is going to be the church in Rome, as Paul talks with them and gives them instruction on their church fellowship practices. We read from Romans 16... (read it).

1. A prayer based on Paul's fellowship with the Romans

As we read those verses, two things should have stood out. One was the greetings that Paul gave to those in the church. The other was the warning he gave about when to separate from others in religious matters.

Let's look more at the greetings. This certainly is a unique chapter in Scripture:

- We hear many unique names of people in this chapter that we don't hear of anywhere else in the Bible.
- We hear many women's names, which was actually rare in ancient literature. At times, some people have accused the Apostle Paul of being a bit of a male chauvinist. Here we see that this was not the case at all!
- We see that these were people that Paul shared a faith and fellowship with by the words he uses. He repeatedly mentions the phrases "in the Lord" and

"in Christ" in referring to these people. He also refers to the common work and ministry that they shared.

- We can't help but notice Paul's commendations and compliments that he gives many of them as he expresses his joy in their faith and their work for the Lord.
- And finally, we can't miss Paul's affection and love for these people.

We also see the greetings that come with the Apostle Paul's letter: ***"Timothy, my co-worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my fellow Jews. I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings."***

What a beautiful chapter of greetings this is! The common thread that united Paul with the people in the church at Rome was the spiritual connection they had in Scripture. Their common faith knew and confessed their sinfulness and their need for a Savior. They all knew that by nature they stood condemned before their holy God, but that Jesus Christ, God's Son, had come to serve as their Savior and gave his life on the cross to pay for their sins. Through Jesus' sacrifice for them, they had eternal life and a common ministry together to spread that message to those around them!

Then we come to the second part of Romans 16, which unmistakably changes tone: ***"Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."*** I suppose the Lord could have given a different command when it came to false teachings. He could have said that if people agree that the Bible is a noble book to follow and believe that fellowship should be shared, despite the distortion of a few doctrines. He could have said that a few false teachings aren't

worth arguing about, especially if they're not about the way of salvation.

Do "other" teachings like this matter? Well, what does Paul say under inspiration of the Holy Spirit? He leaves no doubt that they should separate religiously from those who are promoting false teaching. Back in Paul's day, we can read how cases sprung up that had to be dealt with including:

- Works righteousness
- Believers using free forgiveness as a license to sin more
- Teachers who forbade marriage or eating certain foods
- Teachers who taught falsely about the resurrection of the dead
- People who denied that Christ was truly human
- People involved in sexual immorality
- And people who were simply argumentative, quarrelsome, and divisive!

God's command through Paul is clear: Watch out for those who hold to false teaching and keep away from them.

2. A prayer for our faithfulness

As we hear this final sermon text in this series, let's think about our lives and offer some prayers to the Lord as we take all these concepts and put them into practice.

First, we pray, "Lord, may we judge doctrine faithfully." Perhaps a few words on judging would be in order. After all, there are some in our world who have said that Christians should never judge. The verse, *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged"* is often quoted. Can a Christian judge? The verse above from Matthew 7, which actually has to do with pointing out sin, goes on to say in its full context that proper judging is done after a person has honestly judged themselves, and "taken the plank out of their own eye." Not only that, but a look at other Scripture verses show us that God's expects us to be judging these things.

For example, later in that same chapter, Matthew 7, it says, *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them... Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* How can you avoid such teachings unless you make a judgment?

How do we judge such things? It certainly is not a judgment on a heart, a motive, or even of saving faith. We cannot judge those things. It is a judgment to make concerning what the confession of the mouth is, or where an individual has attached themselves as a devoted member in a congregation. These are outward things that we can and do judge.

Paul could have commanded them in the Lord to continue in fellowship despite disagreement on "other" teachings of Scripture, which today we might list as:

- Whether Mary is sinless and should be venerated and prayed to
- Whether we are commanded to baptize infants with "all nations"
- Whether we can "choose God" and cooperate in our conversion
- Whether Jesus' body and blood are truly present in Holy Communion
- Whether we evolved from monkeys
- Whether you can engage in intimacy before marriage, or with someone of the same gender
- Whether the Word of God is inspired by the Holy Spirit or not
- Whether a Rapture will take place before Judgment Day, or whether Christ will reign in a visible, earthly kingdom for 1000 years
- Whether anyone who is a believer must show it by speaking in tongues

- Whether we contribute to our salvation by our good works
- Whether we should worship the saints

As we pray that God would help us to be faithful judges of true and false teaching, we must realize that we are giving ourselves an assignment. We must know our doctrine. We should be constantly growing in our knowledge of the Bible's teachings. How can we make any sanctified judgments if we don't know the full counsel of the Bible's teachings?

This will also be an assignment for you in knowing what your friends' or extended family's churches teach. When the time comes to discuss doctrines that might separate you from them in having church fellowship, you will want to be educated on those teachings. Perhaps this is a time to encourage you to check out a newer book series in our synod. A series called *"A Lutheran Looks At..."* has recently been started that examines different church bodies and their teachings. Five have been completed so far on Assemblies of God, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, and mega churches. Perhaps such a series would help you in knowing what teachings keep us from enjoying church fellowship with them.

A second prayer that we pray today is, "Lord, may we be evangelical with weak brothers." What is a weak brother? A weak brother is a person who might hold to some erroneous views of some doctrine, but is willing to be instructed and corrected by Scripture. The emphasis on those who are causing divisions and putting obstacles in Romans 16 indicate an ongoing, persistent action. But perhaps our brother is going through a "searching" time as he looks for the truth. In the New Testament book of Jude it says, *"Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire..."* God can use your guidance and instruction to lead him to the truth. But this might take some time. As he struggles with temptations to

accept evolution or to come to grips with what the Lord has told us about morality, and show patience.

As time goes on, if a person becomes convinced in their belief of a false teaching or becomes a devoted member of a church that promotes false teaching, the time may come where we need to separate from them in worship and fellowship. Yet may God help us to deal in patience with weak brothers.

And thirdly, we pray, "Lord, may we practice our fellowship faithfully." The time will come that we know we must sadly separate from others in religious practices and worship. Yet as we think about the ways we need to do this, may God help us look for positives in our own church.

- We may not be able to have our pastors take part in general "community worship services" that involve ministers of different faiths, but we can gather regularly here to worship the Lord.
- We may not be able to do world mission work with other Christian churches not in fellowship with us, but we have plenty of world mission work we can support within our synod.
- We may not be able to have our men join lodges, but they can enjoy Bible study and fellowship in our congregation in many ways.
- We may not be able to have our children take part in the scouting movement with its oaths and merits, but we have many children's ministries and programs to enjoy.
- We may not be able to join in prayers before sporting events at away schools, but we can rejoice that our sports teams are based on our faith, and on letting our Christian faith shine as they play.
- We may not be able to do cooperative youth group work with other churches not of our fellowship, but we can support our church's youth work and

Evergreen Lutheran High School in our fellowship.

- We may not be able to join prayer groups from other churches, as that would give a false impression to them, but we can pray individually for their needs and make use of the “Lifelines” feature in our newsletter.
- When visiting a church not of our fellowship due to a special event in our relation, we may not be able to actively worship or commune, but we can be respectful and learn what we can from the service.

And when our stance for the entire truth of God’s Word causes others to ask questions about the teachings of the Bible, including Church Fellowship, we can rejoice that we have been given the opportunity to speak about what is true and what is false, and that our Christian witness has been noticed. May God give us the words to say at that time!

Finally, as our sermon series on Church Fellowship draws to a close, there is one last fact that we rejoice in. It’s a thought where this whole sermon series began. At the beginning when we asked the question, “Where is God’s Church?” we learned that it is made up of all people of all time who have believed in the name of God’s one and only Son, who has saved us from our sins by dying and rising for us. We can rejoice that one day that Church will be gathered together around the throne of the Lamb in eternity and will praise him for what he has done. There will be no more false teachings to divide us. There will be no more walls of separation because of the devil’s craftiness to distort the Word of God. And we will rejoice there forever.

May God help us to practice church fellowship faithfully as he has commanded. And as we do that, may he also cause us to look forward to that day when we will lift our voices together with all his people in perfect fellowship! Amen.