

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship
December 4, 2022
Rev. YoungMin Kim

Welcome One Another
Romans 15:7-13

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Last Sunday, we talked about the Apostle Paul and the church in Rome based on the Letter to Romans chapter 13. And as I said, the Apostle Paul was not involved in the birth of the church at all. We do not know when and how the church in Rome was established, but we can assume that the faith community in Rome was established by those who joined the feast of the Pentecost in Jerusalem, accepted the Apostle Peter's proclamation about Jesus Christ, were baptized, and returned to Rome. And the faith community in Rome was made up of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. More precisely, the Jewish Christians were those who were born in Israel or Jewish Diasporas outside Israel, who grew up under their Jewish tradition, laws, and cultures, and who accepted Jesus Christ at a certain occasion and became Christians. In other words, even though they were named Christians or Christ-followers, their Jewish identity was strongly settled in their life, mindset, and even faith including sabbath, circumcision, and religious laws. On the other hand, the Gentile Christians in the church were mostly native Roman citizens. Even though they were called the Gentile Christians, they were the citizens of the Roman Empire who had privileges as the empire's citizens. In other words, raised by Roman laws, tradition, and education, they were not bound by Jewish laws and tradition. Likewise, the faith community in the heart of the Roman empire consisted of two fairly different groups.

By the way, an unexpected situation occurred in the faith community. Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews in Rome to leave the city. It was the order of the emperor and became effective immediately. Thus, all Jews, including Jewish Christians in Rome who had dominant power in the church, had to leave. As a result, the absence of leadership in the church occurred. So, during this time, the church was preserved by the Gentile Christians, and they assumed the leadership roles in the church. And the church changed little by little, taking off Jewish tradition and laws within the church.

And years later, the emperor's order was withdrawn, and Jewish Christians returned to Rome and to their faith community. And there seemed to be subtle conflicts between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. One of the conflicts was how to deal with food offered to idols. According to the Jewish laws, the Jewish Christians strictly banned the eating of food offered to idols. But compared to the Jewish Christians, the Gentile Christians were relatively free to eat the food. Including this food issue, there were many conflicts between these two groups such as the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the relationship between the Law and the gospel, the relationship between the church and the state. Last Sunday with Romans chapter 13, we talked about Paul's resolutions about the relationship between the church and the state. But today with chapter 15, let us figure out his resolutions about the relationship between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in the faith community in Rome.

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First, the Apostle Paul identified the Jewish and the Gentile Christians, “the strong and the weak in faith” (Romans 14:1, 15:1). But he did not mean that the Jewish Christians in Rome were always the strong and the Gentile Christians the weak. In the beginning of the church in Rome, the Jewish Christians were absolutely the strong; but after the order of Emperor Claudius, the Gentile Christians became dominant in the faith community. Thus, for Paul, everyone can become strong or weak in the faith community.

For both Christian groups, Paul said, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (15:7). Even though both the Jewish and the Gentile Christians had different backgrounds, traditions, laws, and social values, the Apostle Paul urged both groups to welcome, embrace, and tolerate each other regardless of who was stronger and who was weaker. The reason was very clear. As the entire letter to Romans reveals, not only the Gentiles but also the Jews were sinners who cannot stand before God. But through Jesus Christ and His self-sacrifice on the cross, their sin was forgiven; they became righteous before God; and they became reconciled with God. His sacrifice on the cross was not only for the Jews but also for every man in the world in the past, present, and future. As a result, both the Jewish and the Gentiles Christians in Rome became children of God, and both of them became brothers and sisters in Christ united by His blood. Eventually, the Apostle Paul must have wished the faith community in Rome to be free from conflicts derived from differences of each other and to be filled with joy and peace in faith so that each one of them, regardless of whether they were Jewish or Gentile Christians, would overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

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Let me share a video clip. It was a Super Bowl TV commercial in 2018 made by an auto company (video clip). A rabbi, priest, imam, and monk go to see a football game. Well, if they sit together and talk about the truth, they must have found clear differences with each other. And then, they might have found that there is no reason to meet each other again. But they leave their differences behind and find something in common among them. Football makes them sit side-by-side and cheer for their favorite team with one voice.

Spending the second week of the Advent 2022, we finished our 30-Day Discernment Period last Wednesday. As our lay leader announced, our next step is to have a straw poll this Sunday and next Sunday. Unlike the last survey, this straw poll is only available for the official church members. As a sidenote, it does not matter how long you have joined our church for the vote. You should be baptized in, confirmed in, and/or transferred to our church with the membership class. If you have any question about your membership, please contact Linda and ask her. If you need membership, please join the membership class on Saturday, December 17th. In our congregation, we have two different groups—one is to leave from the denomination and join GMC, and the other is to stay in the denomination. Before you join the straw poll today and next Sunday, please keep in mind that both those who want to leave and those who want to stay are those who are saved by our Lord Jesus Christ and united as brothers and sisters by His blood. Rather than finding differences among us, let us find something in common among us. So, as Paul wishes to the church in Rome, I wish our church to be free from conflicts derived from differences and to be filled with joy and peace in faith so that each one of you overflows with hope by the power of the Spirit. Amen.