

Second Sunday in Advent
December 8, 2019

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Isaiah 11:1-9
Romans 15:4-9

Accept That You Are Accepted

Accept one another, therefore, just as Christ has accepted you, for the glory of God.— Romans 15:7



"Madonna's Lament" by Robert Shaw

When it comes to loving others are you a goose, a goat, or a gull? Maybe I should explain.

I used to live at the beach. Not on the Atlantic but on the Gulf of Mexico. I served two churches on the west coast of Florida, very near the beach. After the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010, I felt a strong desire to watch over the Gulf, to protect it. Several times each week I'd walk along the beach; sometimes I'd take my lunch and eat it while I watched the water. Something told me that if I just kept a close eye on it, nothing like the 200 million gallon oil spill could damage the Gulf again. It was my duty.

Those were wonderful walks, so peaceful. I'd eat my sandwich or whatever leftovers I'd brought sitting alone on a bench. Alone, that is, until the food appeared, then so did the gulls.

Seagulls are lovely to watch. They soar on the wind and dive with effortless turns that look like the Blue Angels sometimes. Jonathan Livingston Seagull for people of a certain age. But you know -- gulls can be wicked when they are competing for food. They will dive bomb other birds, adult humans, and particularly small children when they catch sight of a bit of food. The concept of sharing is completely foreign to them.

What's worse-- if one gull stands out, if it's different in some way, sick or injured, I've seen the other gulls peck and claw at it, sometimes to death.

Geese, on the other hand, have a different pattern. Some migrate through our area, arriving in that familiar V pattern that makes them more aerodynamic and gives them a whopping 71% greater flying range. Stronger birds take turns flying in front, allowing the young and weaker birds to take the easier places behind.

Geese honk their encouragement to one another – a kind of a song.

Here is the most astounding thing – when a bird is sick or wounded and cannot fly, one or two will stay with it until it is well enough to fly, or sadly, when it dies. Geese rarely go it alone.



So let me ask the question again. When it comes to the body of Christ, are you more like a goose or a gull?

There's a right answer to that! No really, it's more like this.



The geese much more closely resemble the vision of the peaceable kingdom that Isaiah describes. The prophet's announcement of the coming Messiah sounds like refreshing rain on our conflict hardened souls:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together ...

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11: 6 and 9)

Advent is our season of hope – hope for a better future, when help and kindness will finally overcome brutality; hope for a future where freedom triumphs over repression and the earth is filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah's is a vision of peace, inaugurated by the Son of David, a kingdom where little children play, instead of practicing active shooter drills, and people and animals rest in safety. "It's a startling vision, a top to bottom reorganization of creation with all the brutality ... left out – [this is] creation reordered, healed, mended, put right."¹ Isaiah's community didn't have much peace, caught between powerful enemies – Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. Israel was invaded, occupied and held hostage again and again, and still the hope of peace with justice remained.

It still does. We say "Peace be with you," and we mean it, but we aren't there yet are we?

My own yearning for a just peace has become more intense every year I've lived – I long for a safe and clean planet for my grandchildren, and a government of selfless and courageous leaders who will put an end to the wretched divisions that plague us.

We aren't there yet, are we? We are competing viciously for power and resources, here in the Land of Plenty, verbally scratching and clawing and often harming one another. Some of our elected leaders act more like seagulls battling over a bit of stolen sandwich than a light to the nations. And some are leading bravely – in a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of

counsel and might. It is our responsibility to ask for this, to require it even, and especially when we disagree on the issues.

Peace is the promise God made to us in Christ; peace is the gift God graciously gives. At Jesus' birth the angel chorus sang:

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace. ⁱⁱ

After his resurrection, when he appeared to his gathered disciples, the first thing he said was:

Peace be with you. ⁱⁱⁱ

The Apostle Paul took it to the church! When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, there was very little peace in the New Testament church. Tensions were running high and Paul had made it his mission to mend the greatest competitive rift of all in the early church-- the division between Jews and Gentiles.

It was like trying to mix oil and water. Jewish refugees were understandably angry at the atrocities committed against them by Gentile Rome. Gentile converts experienced Jewish Christians as clannish and exclusive. Many Jews considered the practices of the Gentiles to be abominations to God's law written in scripture. Paul wrote:

Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (Ephesians 2:14).

And to the Galatians, he said:

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Listen to the New Testament lesson for today from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 15 beginning at verse 4.

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Welcome one another he tells them, *just as Christ has welcomed you*. “Welcome” is a cheery, peace-filled word; it’s the first word in Woods’ mission statement. But don’t mistake welcome for something simple or superficial. This kind of welcome involves serious sacrifice.

Peace is possible, but only through sacrifice. Do what Jesus did, Paul tells them. Just do what he did. Make concessions for each other. Through the entire previous chapter Paul has been urging the believers to sacrifice their personal and political agenda and even some of their personal freedom for the sake of peace – you can imagine that was controversial, as thorny in the first century as it is today.

Here’s the astounding thing that I discovered as I was studying this passage. The verb that Paul uses in verse 7, *pros-lam-ban-o* -- the word we translate “welcome” also means “accept.” In fact many translations say:

Accept one another ... just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.^{iv}

This is how we are to make peace, friends – by accepting God’s grace and giving way to one another. It means taking our turn as lead goose, even if it means flying into the wind. Snatching and grabbing bits of power is not an acceptable practice in the church. I am grateful, more than I can say, I thank God for the gracious, spirit-filled leadership of the Woods congregation and our presbytery. You are truly a gift of God.

You know, Woods is a big tent. We do not all think alike. Acceptance is so much easier when we know one another, even when we disagree. God forbid we should all think alike.

Paul sums it up perfectly in just three words: *Live in harmony*. Last night, at the concert, and on Friday, Jacob and I were sitting on the front row, practically in the orchestra. We could see the movements of artists’ fingers and hear the elegant harmonies as dozens of instruments and hundreds of voices blended in soaring melodies. None of that would have been possible without differences. To live in harmony requires variation.

Peace means accepting another, as Christ has accepted me, and you. Clearly there are some things that cannot be accepted, some actions and attitudes that defy Christ and his gospel. Perhaps you have heard:

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”^v

The hard part is determining what is essential. Here at Woods we are clear -- welcome is essential. Welcome and acceptance are our non-negotiables, and sacrificial love, is the most important gift of all.

Martin Luther once told the story of two mountain goats who met each on a narrow ledge. The ledge was just wide enough for one animal to pass. On the left side was a sheer cliff; on the right side a steep wall.

The two animals were facing each other, and it was impossible for either to turn around or to back up.

What to do? If they had been people, they might have started head-butting each other until they both plunged off the cliff. But these goats had more sense than that. One of them laid down on the trail and let the other literally walk over him--and both were safe.^{vi}

So what do you think? Are you a goat, a gull or a goose? It may sound like a silly question but look at it in the macro – the stakes are very high. In fact, the future of peace may very well depend on God’s human creatures’ ability to accept one another as God in Christ has accepted us.

It’s Advent. The Savior is coming. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and might, the spirit of counsel and understanding. It’s Advent, and the child is coming, the child who will both accept and lead us. It is Advent, so let the mystery be born in you.

Twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich wrote:

“Sometimes ... a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.’”

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!

If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded... nothing but acceptance.^{vii} Amen?

ⁱ John M. Buchanan, from a sermon “Peace” preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

ⁱⁱ Luke 2:14

ⁱⁱⁱ John 20:19

^{iv} Romans 15:7 NIV

^v This has historically been attributed to Augustine, but actually originated in 1617 by Archbishop of Split, Marco Antonio de Dominis

^{vi} Robert J. Morgan, *Preacher’s Sourcebook Creative Sermon Illustrations*, Thomas Nelson, 2007, 463

^{vii} Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted” Academia.com www.academia.edu/36842780/YOU_ARE_ACCEPTED