

## “The Marks of a True Christian”

### Romans: 12: 1-21

Today, we have a familiar text from the Book of Romans and just by simply hearing and reading these very words from Paul, we know that this text has something to do with community, which seems an appropriate text for worship today as we celebrate World Communion Sunday. But I invite us to take a deeper look at this type of community in which Paul is calling all of us to participate because there is more to this notion of community and how it relates to our faith than just a surface glance will offer us.

In this text, Paul is pushing the Christians in Rome and us gathered here today to really think about what it means to be a community of faith and to realize that this connection through community extends beyond our four walls, extends beyond our city limits, extends beyond the boundaries that we try to set up to define who's in and who is out, extends beyond our own personal feelings, and is centered on the grace of God.

This connection through community that Paul is talking about is a connection that encompasses all people as part of the Body of Christ, a connection that engages us in everyone's story, a connection that involves us in one another's

lives, and a connection that is filled with active concern for one another, an even more appropriate theme and notion for World Communion Sunday.

As we may remember, the church in Rome had written Paul for some guidelines on exactly how they are supposed to live out their faith every day as followers of Jesus Christ. They wanted to know exactly what they were supposed to do as Christians, as ones who are called to share the Gospel message to show that their lives had been transformed by the gift of God's grace. And as you may also remember, Paul simply responded to their request by saying, "Love as God loves. Love your neighbor as yourself, which leads us to our text today.

Paul knows this community in Rome. And he knows that if he doesn't clarify this notion of loving their neighbor a little bit more, he will just get another letter back from them asking, "Well, just who exactly is our neighbor?"

So Paul starts laying it out for this community in Rome before they even asked. He starts by saying that their neighbors are the people in their church and the people that they saw every day." One can almost imagine the Christians gathered in Rome, pursuing Paul's letter, "Okay, we can do that. The people in our church and the people we see every day. Check.

But Paul goes on to say, "Oh wait, before you get too comfortable with that, I forgot to include another important group. When Christians think about just exactly who their neighbors really are, we can't forget to include all the other

Christians around the world because we are all connected by faith. We are all just trying to live out the Gospel message in our lives the best way we know how and one of the things that Jesus did tell us was that we should keep our brothers and sisters in Christ in prayer. So we need to expand our circle of acceptance just a bit beyond the local community to include those we are connected with through faith. We can't forget to include them as our neighbors.

And once again, one can almost imagine the Roman Christians saying, "Okay, Paul, let's see if we have got this straight. Our neighbors, the people we are called to care about, the people we are supposed to show concern for, the people we are supposed to see to their needs daily, the people that are included in our circle of acceptance are the people in our church, the people we see every day, and the people around the world who are just like us, trying to proclaim the Gospel message and share the good news that the Kingdom of God has come near.. Okay we can do that. That's simple enough. Our circle of acceptance still includes people who are like us in some way. We can do this. Living in community is not so bad.

But Paul goes on to say, "Oh yeah, while we are including folks into our circle of compassion, into our circle of care, into the circle of acceptance, we can't forget to include the stranger and our enemies. We can't leave them out because we are connected to these groups as well through God's grace and love."

Okay, Paul, so what you are saying is that our community, our circle of acceptance includes, let us see if we have this right: 1) people who go to church with us 2) people in our actual defined community city limits 3) people who go to Church around the world because they are journeying with us in faith as brothers and sisters in Christ, 4) the stranger and 5) our enemies. We can do that...Hey, wait a minute...That's an awful lot of people that Paul just included into our circle of acceptance. He even included people that we don't like. He even included people that are not like us, that think differently from us, that act differently from us, that may believe things differently from us. He didn't leave anyone out. Paul included basically everyone, people we like and the people we don't, the people like us and the people not like us, into our circle of acceptance!

One can almost imagine that at this point, that the community in Rome was probably wishing that Paul's letter to them with all the guidelines on how to respond to God's grace, all those guidelines on how to live out their faith, had just gotten lost in the mail! Because the way Paul responded to their questions was not what they were expecting! Deep down, they were hoping that he would give them permission to exclude a few people from their community. They were hoping that Paul would have given them permission to set a few boundaries defining exactly who is in and who is out. But instead, he reminded them that God's grace and God's love doesn't work like that. Instead, he reminded them that no one is

excluded from the table of God. No one is left out of the Body of Christ. No one is left out of the circle of acceptance.

Throughout our text today Paul is challenging this group in Rome to think about doing community differently. He wants to move beyond their confining and limited definitions of community, to move beyond their tendency for isolation and separation, to move beyond their tendency to stay behind their four walls, sitting in their comfortable pews and move towards a way of living in authentic real community together where all are connected, where all are involved in each other's lives, where all are engaged with each other's story as brothers and sisters in Christ, just like God created us to be, just like God calls us to do.

Paul wants the community in Rome and the community gathered here today to realize that the connection, the community that is found through the Body of Christ is so much more than labels that separate and divide. The Body of Christ is full of grace that unites and binds us all together, named and claimed as God's own.

And we create this connection of community by living out the marks of a true Christian, which include engaging all of God's children as real people, not just numbers on a page, recognizing that all people are created in the image of God, not just the ones that look and think like us, include living lives that reflect the understanding that we are responsible to and for one another, not just the people

we like. Paul tells the community in Rome and the community gathered here today that the marks of a true Christian call us to come together and live our lives with genuine love for all of God's children, genuine love that says all are welcomed and embraced as God's beloved, genuine love that called us as people of faith to live in unity with one another, genuine love that calls us to move beyond the understanding that it is no longer about me and my needs, genuine love that reminds us that it is about us coming together as the Body of Christ working together to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near, genuine love where your hurts have become my hurts, where your joys have become my joys, where your story has become my story, where your life has become so intertwined with mine that I cannot think of time when you were not in my life as my brother or my sister. Those are the marks of a true Christian. And those are the marks that define the type of Christian, the type of person of faith, the type of community that Paul is calling us to be.

And the good news is that this is exactly the type of community that we have found here in this place but this community doesn't end at our four walls or at our doorstep. It is the type of community that we are called to share with all those included in our circle of acceptance. We are called to look beyond our pews, look beyond our four walls and realize that our circle of acceptance is not limited to just those people who think and act like us. Our circle of acceptance includes all of

God's children, the people we like and the people we don't, the people who act and think like us and the people that don't, the people we call friends and the people we don't. Our circle of acceptance includes all of God's children.

We are called to reflect this type of community to all of God's children and invite others to be a part of this circle of acceptance, not because what we can get from them and not because they bring special gifts to the table. We do this because we know that without each other supporting one another, loving one another, journeying together, the Body of Christ is incomplete. It isn't whole. It is weakened and broken. Without embracing one another and without including all of God's children, not just the ones that think like us or act us, not just the ones that we like, into our circles of compassion, the Body of Christ cannot become what God created it to be: a place where healing and wholeness can happen, a place where reconciliation can happen, a place where grace can happen for all of God's children, a place where all can experience more the goodness of God, and most importantly a place where all have a seat at the table.

As part of the Body of Christ here on earth, we as Christians are called to manifest genuine love in our daily behavior as a connected community of faith, connected with those gathered here today, connected with those gathered around a similar table around the world, connected with those that we have not met yet, connected with those who have hurt us in some way or form because we know that

there is something amazing that happens when we do this. We experience the Kingdom of God here in our midst.

When we come together as true community, as real community, as authentic community, living together, working together, sharing together, being real with one another, a community that is more than just the people sitting in the pews beside us, a community that is more than just the people we like, a community that includes all of God's children, we catch a glimpse of the Holy at that moment and we experience the grace and unity of God.

And that is the mark of a true Christian.

May we always remember just exactly who is included in our community as we embrace the marks of a true Christian here on earth. Amen.