

The Body of Christ
Romans 15:22-33

1 Corinthians 12:1-12

1 Corinthians 12:13-31

Responsive Psalm 86:1-10

This morning we are going to be looking at the last half of chapter 15. Here in this chapter we find Paul wrapping up this letter he wrote to the churches in Rome. In these closing statements he begins to make it become apparent his heart felt love and yearning for these believers. This letter that Paul writes, as with all of his letters is not just a letter from a scholar, or teacher, nor is it merely a letter from an authority figure seeking to set them straight, which it is each of those things it is clear that Paul's relationship is not a disconnected, intellectual one, but rather a personal, heartfelt one born out of a concern and love for the people he was writing to. Sometimes we can get caught up in the nature of the instruction, or the deep theological and doctrinal principles that have been presented, forgetting that these letters written by Paul in the new testament scriptures are written to people of whom he cares for deeply, and many he knows personally. There is a real, true human element to these writings and they are not just some dry intellectual essay, they are written to real people who Paul cares about, who are dealing with real issues within their congregations that Paul has sought to instruct so that they may find this peace, and unity in Christ that he has been writing about.

In these last closing words here in chapter 15, and into 16 is where we get this sense of this personal connection, and the deep love and concern that Paul has for these people. Much like a father wanting the best for his children, who wants to see them grow, become independent and self sufficient, Paul wants that for all the churches which had been established under his ministry, that they would grow, flourish, and be shining lights of God's glory in each of their own local communities. We didn't talk about it much last week, but in the last few verses that we read Paul writes to the believers in Rome the importance and his own understanding of his ministry call, knowing and understanding that God had called him primarily as a minister to the Gentiles, to go forth into countries and to a people who have not heard the gospel as we see in verse 20. "And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation. But as it is written; to whom he was not announced, they shall see, and to those who have not heard shall understand"

Though Paul had a heart for those whom he has met on his travels, and for the churches which have been established through his ministry, he knew and understood that his calling was to the lost who have not yet heard, to a people who were yet on the outside, so that the gospel may reach all peoples, throughout all the earth so that God's people may know, understand, and believe that Christ is the promised one, the fulfillment of generations, who has died not only for the Jews, but for the whole world so that we, by the blood of him who died, may be reconciled to God by the redemption of our souls through the death and Resurrection of the one who was sent to accomplish salvation for his people. For as Paul wrote back in chapter 10, "For whoever believes on him will not be put to shame, for there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call on him. For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him who they have not believed? And how shall they believe on him who they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent. As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things."

This was Paul's ministry, to bring glad tidings of good things to a people who have not heard, so they may know and believe, turn from their sins and repent. But as we know from his letters he has written to the churches, this ministry has brought great tribulation, many trials and much suffering, being hated by many, quite literally physically being tossed out of cities, beaten, stoned and left for dead outside the gates. Kind of puts into light how easy we have it today at this moment, we have not yet had our lives threatened because of our belief, we have not yet been banished, beaten, and imprisoned. In this land of which we live, in this time claiming Christ is fairly easy, with only minor risks of ridicule and mocking. But there may come a time where that all changes, a time of true trial and tribulation, it will be a time that will expose the true followers of Christ from those who merely claim to know him. And though it may not happen in our lifetime, it may and I think it is important to always be ready to search our hearts and test our faith to be sure that we are those who stand upon the promises of God, through Christ no matter what may come.

Now I am not one who believes that the end of the world is just around the corner, each and every generation has had their "this is the end" moments and yet God sees fit that the world continues, and his ministry continues because he still has people out there who have not heard, and who have not believed who must yet hear this gospel message, and it is not until the last of his chosen children have been brought in will he come again in all of his glory. That all being said, it is not hard to look at all the turmoil, division, and strife we see all around us today in a apparent rise of darkness, as sin is all the more celebrated, and more and more we see Christianity, being mocked, it is becoming all the more important that we know what we believe, why we believe, and trust and lean on God's sovereignty in all these things knowing that all things work for his purpose and glory. But the good news to all of that, scripture tells us that the light gospel shines brightest in the dark. The more driven to despair and empty and hopeless the promises of the world become the greater the hope of the gospel shines.

We can even see this in our own lives sometimes, when things are good and going well we tend to just cruise along in our life, but when turmoil arises it tends to drive us to God, to prayer, to seek comfort and understanding. Though that shouldn't be the case, it often times is the reality, so then that would suggest that one of the purposes and reasons of such times, is to drive us to God, such times tend to bring us nearer the more and more that we find Christ as being the only hope that we have. And honestly, that is why we gather together, that is why we meet together, that is why we fellowship together, it is to encourage one another in this faith, so that we like not like Elijah feeling like we are the only ones left, but we are instead surrounded by people who through a mutual love of Christ, care and love one another.

And as much as the times change, mankind does not, in many ways the issues that plagued the early church still plague her today, and there are still yet lost people who need the gospel, and there are still those who have such a hatred for the things of God they would revel in the destruction of God's people. So, just like in the days of Paul, the mission is still the same, to preach the gospel to where Christ has not been named, and even as often is the case today..where Christ has been named for many are deceived believing in a God of their own making. So as we read our passage this morning, we will see that the drive that Paul has for this gospel ministry is really his main focus and purpose as he states that he would like to come to Rome in person, and normally it is the ministry to the unreached people which has hindered him from doing so but as we will see Paul is on a different mission heading back to Jerusalem. Let us go ahead and read this morning starting in verse 14 of chapter 15, and reading to the end of the chapter. (read 14-33)

We see in verse 25 and 26 that Paul is personally bringing donations to the poor and oppressed believers in Jerusalem from the Gentile churches which had been established through his ministry. This delivery of the monetary gifts given must have been of great importance to Paul as he is bringing it himself, in verse 23 we see he says “but now no longer having a place in these parts” It is likely he sees his mission as being complete in the area he has spent a few years at, the gospel has been brought into the region he had gone to and he is now setting his sight upon another. And in a great symbol of unity in Christ these, newly established believers are sending monetary gifts back to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem to aid in their financial strife. Paul has been leading up to this over these past few chapters talking about unity in Christ, what that should look like, and how it is accomplished, and here he is bringing with him an example of it.

Paul said that they were more the happy to aid in this way, seeing that the gospel had come to them through the support and ministry of Paul who was sent to them with blessings from the council of church leaders in Jerusalem as is seen in Acts chapter 15, being charged to go out and bring the gospel to the gentiles in Asia.

This response from the gentile churches to give such an offering and gift to the troubled saints in Jerusalem is a rather huge gesture that goes often overlooked, the implications of gentiles sacrificing and giving of themselves to a peoples who for generations ridiculed and treated them as something lesser, shows the work of Christ in the hearts and minds of these people, a sacrifice of self to a people who previously would have nothing to do with them, but who now has seen that this gospel message is for the gentile as well as for the Jew. Paul says in verse 27, “They were pleased to give this gift for they saw themselves as debtors, the church in Jerusalem sent out Paul with their blessing to bring the gospel to them, of which they now share in the spiritual blessings in Christ, they felt that they likewise could bless them in their time of difficulty and hardship. This shows our own service toward Christ, who came and died while we were yet outsiders, and he has drawn us into his own presence therefore we owe him, not just monetary gifts given, not just occasional prayers and good works, but he who has given all, is owed all. Our response to Christ, is like the gentile churches to the Jerusalem church, by his proclamation, and by the gift of his own life, we have been brought into the family of God, therefore it is our reasonable service to give of ourselves toward that ministry, to further the gospel, take care of the widows, reach out to the broken and lost in a great show of unity and love for the one who first loved us.

What we see here in these closing words from Paul as he is winding down his letter, is the marks of Christian belief and behavior seeing and recognizing that Christ is the center pillar of our faith and belief and all those who are in him are united together with him having been made brothers and sisters, out of many we have become one family under God by the blood of Jesus Christ. And we also see in the next few verses some concern that Paul has as he asks for prayer that he may be delivered from those who do not believe, and who have actively sought to thwart and silence his ministry, and that the ministry that he has done would be accepted by the fellow believers in Jerusalem. As Tom Holland points out in his commentary, there were many Jews who saw Christians as imposters, and they deeply despised them for claiming that it was they who were the true descendants of Abraham. The nation of Israel have been given the promises and borne the hope of their fulfillment through many years, generations of sufferings but tragically she rejected the one to whom these promises pointed, but there was however still a remnant who recognized and welcomed Jesus, the bringer and fulfiller of salvation. And likewise accepted the gospel calls mission to make known his salvation through all the nations.

So there was always a risk with Paul going back to Jerusalem, for he was seen as one who had brought the gospel to the gentiles, and there would be those who would therefore despise him and seek his life. We know from the book of Acts that Paul did indeed make it to Rome but not by the means and pathway that he had planned. For his time in Jerusalem was met with opposition he was beaten, threatened to be hanged, and put on trial at which he appealed to his Roman citizenship to be extradited to Rome for a trial under Caesar hopefully to be away from bias Jewish judges who would seek to put him away for good, or even have him killed. So his journey to Rome did not include a church building mission through Spain as he had hoped, but rather it was a 2 year house arrest as he awaited trial.

Paul was likely aware of the dangers that awaited him upon his return, which puts a lot more weightiness into the importance of this offering he was bringing to the believers in Jerusalem. He could have sent a messenger to deliver the monetary gifts, but he himself brought it seeing a great importance in showing undivided support from the gentile churches which had been established in his outreach ministry to them. So much so, that Paul was willing to risk his own life in the delivery of that message and gift. We see some of this as well in verse 30, where he asks for prayer, “I urge you brothers, by the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle praying to God for me.” Paul's request for prayer here gives us a bit of an insight into some of the struggles he has with bringing these 2 branches of the church together, reconciling the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers to be reckoned as one body in Christ, in his appeal to strive together. Paul knew that his life was in constant danger because of the hatred that some Jews had toward him not only because of his turning away from Judaism, and preaching the gospel of Christ, but also because of his call and ministry to reach out to the gentiles.

He implored the believers in Rome to pray for him as he made this journey that he may achieve this goal that he had set out on, his willingness to lay down in life for this journey back into Jerusalem shows also a great love for the suffering saints there, and again the importance of this symbol of unity he was bringing to them. In the past month or so we have been talking about the importance of unity within the local body of believers but we also see a unity here expressed for the universal church, that is a unity not just between a group of believers but all believers. And that unity is driven by the same as any call for spiritual unity in a local expression of the body of Christ, as all believers through out creation are united together in Christ. And we will one day experience a final calling where we meet our Lord and Savior face to face, surrounded by such a great multitude of our brothers and sisters, where we will be truly united together in the presence of our God. But until that day, we should as Paul implores us all, to strive together both as a local body and as a corporate church in Christ. Paul put his life on the line for this unity, in a show and expression of faith from the Gentile believers who freely and gladly gave of themselves to assist believers they have not met, but knew were suffering and they could reach out to help.

Paul believed that this was worth putting his life at risk for it was a vital expression of the love we are to have for one another in Christ, and such an expression was also important to the ministry and work of the gospel. Imagine being a Jewish believer, having your needs met by a generous gift given to you by a people who you had previously believed to be no better then animals. I am sure there would be a bit of a humbling experience in that, but also a great blessing through this expression of love through this understanding of unity in Christ. In conclusion Paul urges unity, and he sees this as such an important thing to seek that he himself put his own life at risk to achieve it. As Jesus taught in his own ministry, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself can not stand.”

We are the nation of Christ, who live in small houses and communities of Christ as we gather together to worship and praise him week after week in this local expression of this larger body. To not recognize the unity we have in Christ, is to reject a part of the body that is why this expression of love from the gentile churches to the believers in Jerusalem was paramount and of utmost importance. And this too should be our heart and our mind, in the flesh it is easy to be isolated, and infact my own natural inclination is to be closed off from others but that is not what we are called to, we are called in a united call to bring the gospel to the world, but not only that, to express the love and hope that the gospel calls for toward one another, living as Christ, giving of self, even at times maybe to the point of our own danger or detriment, for we are to be a living sacrifice in service of our Lord, striving together for the sake of the gospel. That is our calling, that is our purpose, to be a witness for this hope found only in Christ until he comes again uniting us together from all nations, and all time into his presence. May we like Paul see and understand the importance of this call and expression of unity, for the church of God has enemies on all sides and we must stand together in faith ministering the gospel, encouraging, uplifting, and supporting one another in this endeavor to the glory of God, and that God maybe pleased to use us in his ministry, as a body of believers united together in his grace.