

First Presbyterian Church
Romans 15:1-4, “The Neighbors”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/25/2020

This month we’ve been using the metaphor of soil and plant growth
to think about the conditions that our spiritual lives are growing within.
We’ve hit on a lot of the headline level issues in the world around us,
but today I want to think about some thing else in our soil:
The Neighbors.

Now – as I say those words, it suddenly strikes me that talking about
“The Neighbors” in “our soil” sounds like it could be
from some kind of horrific straight to Netflix Halloween movie,
but that’s not what I mean!

If we think about our neighbors as a kind of soil for our spiritual lives,
I hope you’ll see that this has nothing to do with burying them
and everything to do with the fact that who we spend time with,
the people we commonly live and work around,
are massive influences on our spiritual lives.

Even people we don’t know personally but we recognize
from favorite restaurants or grocery stores, people we drive alongside,
all of these people are directly connected to our spiritual growth.

Now you might be thinking,
“You obviously don’t know the people in my neighborhood, in my school,
or in my workplace – they are *anything* but spiritual.”
But that doesn’t matter! They’re people.

And people are made in the image of God.
They’re all people who are loved by God and with whom the Holy Spirit
is engaged in a conversation whether they are aware of it or not.

Our relationships with these people,
whether we are eager to see them or would rather avoid them,
whether they make us laugh or make us shake our heads,
whether they tend toward the sacred or the profane,
are the primary environment in which our spiritual
growth is tested, expressed, and realized.

So my ears perked up when I read Romans 15:1-4 last week.
I think Paul's got something to say that will help us reckon
with our neighbors in our spiritual growth.

At the outset, Paul refers to "we who are strong" and the "failings of the weak."
I'm not going to overwork the details on these terms,
because we spent some time in Romans 13 and 14
back in September and went over all that back then.

But the short version is this: The church in Rome was composed
of both people who thought they should adhere to the Jewish dietary law,
and those who had no connection to those practices
and felt free to eat as they wished.

Rather than taking sides, Paul recognizes that both sides
would consider themselves "strong" and the others "weak"
and so he allows each group to identify themselves as they wish
while pressing both groups to pursue unity
within the church rather than splitting
over these matters of conscience.

So Paul opens up chapter 15 saying that
"We who are strong [that sounds like it's probably my favorite group]
ought to bear with the failings of the weak
[obviously not good honest folks like us!]
and not to please ourselves."

Bear with the weak – and do not *please* ourselves.

Verse 2 provides the flipside of this first idea:
We shouldn't seek to please ourselves,
but **"We should all please our neighbors for their good,
to build them up."**

You hear that? Paul says it's your job to please all your neighbors.
Okay, well – good luck with that! ... let's pray.

No, I think we're going to have to explore this a bit more.

You can see that "please" is kind of a squishy word to use here,
because it can have a lot of meanings.

It turns out that the Greek word translated as “please” in these verses means,
“to be acceptable to.”

Paul is not saying, then, that our goal is to make everybody happy –
to be “people pleasers,” to never rock the boat
or suggest something that others might disagree with.

Thank God for that, because if our job was really to go out
and please all my neighbors, we’d probably do just as well trying
to

Rather, Paul is saying, “Don’t impose your personal sense
of what’s spiritually acceptable, what’s morally right,
on others who don’t hold your view.”

The strong (whoever they are) should not impose their strength
on the weak just because they find it to be ... acceptable,
or pleasing to their own way of thinking.

In the third verse we get yet more depth on precisely what Paul means
by this word “please.” It reads, “**For even Christ did not
please himself but, as it is written:
“The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”**”

If we *had* thought that Paul’s goal was for the church
to simply make people happy by doing whatever it is they want,
this verse completely destroys that possibility.

Because Jesus was anything but a people pleaser.

He was constantly telling people things they didn’t want to hear,
constantly refusing to do the things that other people
thought he should do, and constantly watching people
walk away in a huff.

Jesus was anything but a people pleaser.

But Jesus did forego seeking to do as he pleases,
to take advantage of his divine status.

Jesus did not seek his own comfort or pleasure
by passing hardship from himself onto others.

The ultimate example of this, of course,
is seen in the manner of Jesus' death by crucifixion
in the midst of crowds casting insults upon him.

Paul makes reference to this by quoting Psalm 69,
which is a very bad-news kind of Psalm.

In Psalm 69 the Psalmist David is bemoaning his life
and all the hurt that his enemies are inflicting upon him,
and then in verse 9 he says to the Lord, to Yahweh,
**“zeal for your house [that is the Temple of the Lord in Israel] consumes me
and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.”**

That's the line that Paul brings out here in Romans 15:3.

The “you” in this verse is not the neighbors, nor anyone in the church,
but the Lord God in Heaven.

Christ did not seek to please himself but rather to do what was acceptable
in the eyes of God, even if it meant he was pelted with insults,
even if it meant dying on a Roman cross while Jewish officials
gave approval in the background.

So think now about our neighbors. Think about them as the soil
that surrounds us as we seek to grow in Christ.

Think about all the things you *wish* were different about them.

Oh, if they would just stop doing this. Oh, if they would just start doing that.
Then my life with God would be so much more easy
and carefree among these neighbors of mine.

But no! What we learn from the Apostle Paul is that we should not
look for others in the church or in the world around us
to fit our sense of propriety.

Rather we flip it around, and live in a way that brings goodness into their lives.

That's verse 2: **“We should all please our neighbors *for their good,*
to build them up.”**

What brings goodness into the lives of our neighbors is living in ways
that promote the flourishing of creation by honoring our Creator.

So let our goal be to develop relationships in our neighborhoods,
in our workplaces, in our schools, in the marketplace
that do not seek to avoid hardship for ourselves,
but rather embrace hardship for the sake of benefiting others.

Let us live in a way that doesn't line our own pockets,
but which lines the pockets of those who Jesus' spent time with –
the outsiders, the people standing around on corners,
people from unusual backgrounds,
who look a little "suspicious" (whatever that means),
the people who don't belong.

Let's live in a way that gets us closer to them.

That's how Jesus suggests we deal with the neighbors.

When we see our neighbors in this way, they stop being obstacles
to our spiritual growth, and become partners
in adopting the attitude of Jesus.