

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Saturday and Sunday, September 12-13, 2020

“Uncomfortable – How far are you willing to follow Jesus – We do not live to ourselves”
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner, Jr.

Romans 14:1-12

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

All of us have faced big changes to our way of life. I don't know about you, but it has made me very uncomfortable to get knocked-out of my normal routines of life. New patterns of behavior that you and I could not even have imagined a year ago. Patterns are a big part of who we are. A big part of everyday life. Patterns helps us to get organized. It's how we get ready for the day.

When I get ready for the day, I have the same pattern. I wake up, I go to the bathroom, I let the dogs out, I feed the dogs, I make coffee and tea, I brush my teeth, I take a shower, and I get dressed. Well now maybe I wait for the shower and getting dressed until the afternoon. But you get what I mean.

Patterns help us with direction getting where we want to go. Think about the paths that you take over and over and over again. Just this week my wife told me that she had found a better way for us to get home, and I said, Oh, I definitely want to take that path, it's a lot faster. But sure enough, I got to the end of our parking lot and instead of making the left to go the quicker way, I made the right and I went the longer way. Why, because it was the path that I had always taken.

Patterns also help us with relationships. Seeing our friends, the banter back and forth. But these days we can be afraid to be around people.

Patterns though also help us to think. For example, if I were to say to you, what's next in the pattern, ready one, two, three, four – five, right. A, B, C, D, -- E. Our ability to recognize patterns help human beings develop into higher beings, it's called *pattern processing*, and it helps us grown in intelligence, in language, imagination, invention, even faith. But because we're so good at patterns, because we're so good at recognizing patterns, sometimes we can miss some things. Take gambling for example, the odds are that as you play the possibility of you winning is incredibly slim, no matter what game you play. But if you have been playing, say a slot machine, or a lottery ticket, and you lose every time you begin to think that you're due a win. Now your pattern has been to

lose, lose, lose and lose. So, your mind begins to think well it must be time for me to get a win. But the odds never changed. You're still probably going to lose.

This idea of pattern processing hits closer to home when we think about our relationships. We can get used to seeing things in a certain way, acting in a way that seems normal to you but may be different to another person.

I see that in couples who are preparing for marriage. They have created patterns and expectations for their relationship and their lives, often resembling their parents. In marriage though they need to learn how to navigate new patterns because their partner may have come from different patterns. That's why communication and conflict resolution in a marriage is so important, and it's important for all of us to develop those skills in building relationships, any relationship.

It's the most important set of skills in the church as well. The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Rome, wants to help them navigate their relationships, he wants to help them navigate the disagreements within the church. But as you know, the Church can get set in patterns as well. Maybe you have heard the phrase, "we've never done it that way before." Patterns can lead to ruts. They can get us stuck places where we can't move, that we can't do the things that we probably should be doing.

Now Rome of the first century was a cosmopolitan center of the Empire. Rome was incredibly diverse, and the early Roman church reflected that diversity. There were major differences between Jewish believers and Gentile believers of Jesus. Their religious upbringing, the patterns and expectations were very, very different. But the people were unique in other ways as well. Some believers worked for the government, some were shop owners, some were slaves, some were masters; some were wealthy, most of the church in Rome was poor. In addition, Paul tells us, they were all at different stages of spiritual maturity. Paul wanted them to be aware of their patterns of belief and how they live. But he also wants them to be aware of their brothers and sisters who may have different experiences and different values. And he wants them to understand where people are coming from and not simply to pass judgment on the other person.

Every person is unique, with unique backgrounds, experiences, families, and upbringing.

Our patterns are just that, they are **our** patterns. Others may be different. That doesn't necessarily make them better or worse, just different.

It's what makes you, you. Your family, your family, our church, our church.

So, Paul, counsels, stop judging and start accepting each other. Christians find unity in Christ and his Lordship, regardless of the differences we may have. We hear the same gospel, we break the same bread, we receive the same blessing or benediction from God.

The Lord Jesus is at the center, whether you vote democratic or republican; liberal or conservative, are white or black or Asian; traditional or contemporary; Steelers, Eagles, or even a Ravens fan. Whatever you do, whatever you believe, Paul says “honor the Lord and give thanks to God.” Or in the words of 17th century Lutheran Theologian, Peter Meiderlen, *“In things necessary, unity; in things not necessary, liberty; in all things, grace.”*

Unity, freedom, grace and forgiveness, these are great words for us to live by, patterns of behavior for us to emulate. *“In all things necessary, unity; in things not necessary, liberty; in all things, grace.”*

Acceptance creates room for growth to continue rejection just stunts our growth. Focus instead on the grace of God, focus on Jesus and his love.

You and I don't live in a vacuum; everything we do affects others, and we need to consider our responsibility to each other and that's the reason for all the safeguards we've been taking the last six months.

One of the scholars I read said this, “We can demand freedom for ourselves, but we must also allow other believers that same freedom. If demonstrating our freedom causes us to act in an uncaring, hurtful way toward other believers, we are not yet free.” Or as Paul says, “We do not live to ourselves, we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.”

As Jesus followers, we live for God. Our lives are ultimately for Christ alone. Our entire life, from beginning to end, belongs to God. We live and we die to him and your relationship with God and the people that are around you are more important than life or death. You are the Lord's.

Brothers and sisters these times that we are living in will pass, and soon, I pray. And we'll have new patterns of living, new ways of being the Church together. It might make us uncomfortable at first, but if we live for Christ, if we honor God and give him thanks, all will be well. Amen to that.