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Oak Grove UMC
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Connect: Welcome

Romans 15: 1-7

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.
²Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." ⁴For 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.
⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

(Slide 1: Connect: Welcome)

When I arrived at Central Washington University as a freshman, I was under instruction from my youth pastor to join the campus fellowship group. So when I saw their booth in the student union building during freshman orientation week, I dutifully walked up and asked about joining. Julie gave me a flyer, walked me around the corner to show me the room where they met and when I showed up for Friday night worship, she came over and sat with me. Next thing I knew, I was signed up as a part of the small group of women who met in Julie's dorm room on Tuesday nights. We did a little bible study together, shared about our lives, and each week Julie led us in praying for one another.

During my four years in Central Christian Fellowship, members of my small group:

- Brought me Kleenex and cough syrup when I had a cold
- Called me if they didn't see me at Friday night worship
- Were my study buddies
- and included me into their circle of friends and invited me to do fun things.

Julie's small group welcomed me and made me feel like a part of the community.

In our scripture today the church in Rome needed to be reminded of how to be a welcoming community. Paul (and we think Romans actually is one of the authentic letters of Paul (Marcus Borg, *Evolution of the Word*, 119)) is writing to the church in Rome because they're having "food issues." (Borg, p120)

The Roman historian Suetonius gives us a little background as to why. Emperor Claudius had expelled all of the Jews, including Christian Jews from Rome in the year 49, then in 54 the order was rescinded, and by around 58 AD when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, Jews and Jewish Christians had begun to return to the Roman community of God-lovers, (Borg, p120) and the influx of new folks was giving them food issues.

(Slide 2: Love feast food fight)

Greeks who used to worship Roman gods were worried about eating food sacrificed to the gods they used to worship -- because animal sacrifices were sold like fast food from the Temples. The returning Jews felt that all believers should keep kosher, and as Paul described it in Romans 14: 2, "some (people) believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables," to try to avoid breaking any rules.

Everybody was judging everybody else for their food choices! So the potluck love feasts which were supposed to be welcoming celebrations of communion, were turning into fights over food.

Of course, the real issue wasn't food. The real issue was culture.

What was the "right way" to be a Christian in Rome?

Who gets to make the rules?

The Greeks who stayed?

The Jews who are back?

What about those other new people with new ideas, like those strange pale faced slaves -- the Gauls, Saxons and *Brittons*.

Do they get a say?

Who gets to decide what food is “allowed” at the potluck?

Who decides which language is spoken in worship?

What songs are considered worshipful?

Who gets to decide how we teach our children together or how coffee hour is run?

Are these questions starting to sound kind of familiar?

All of chapter 14 is Paul explaining why we shouldn't judge one another over something as unimportant as food. Instead, we need to,

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (15:7)

(slide 3: Welcome one another... just as Christ has welcomed you)

And welcoming looks like:

- putting up with one another, even when you're sure the other person's position is “weak” (15:1)
- Caring more about pleasing our neighbors than about pleasing ourselves. (15:1-2)
- Encouraging and building one another up, instead of tearing one another down with judgement and criticism (15: 2)
- and living in harmony with one another, because Jesus asked us to. (15:5)

The church in Rome was getting bigger. All these new people were coming in with different cultures and different ideas, and they were struggling with learning how to welcome one another into community.

The community of Oak Grove is changing. About half the organizers of the Summer Fest last week have lived here for less than 2 years, including me!

Our church community is changing. 22 people have joined the church in the past year and I'm seeing new faces almost every Sunday. I'm hearing from both long time members and newer folks that there are so many of us now that it's getting hard to get to know everybody. Growth is wonderful, but it's also challenging to figure out who we are and how we do things together as we welcome one another in Christ.

I don't know how they dealt with the challenge of welcoming new people in Rome, but I do know how John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, dealt with the challenge of welcoming new people into the Methodist movement. He started small groups and called them class meetings.

Members:

studied scripture together,
They talked about their lives and their faith
They prayed for one another,
cared for one another when needs arose and
did service projects together.

When you get to know people better, it's easier to be in community together.

My United Methodist History professor taught me that where there were class meetings the Methodist movement thrived and did great things. Where there was only preaching, the Methodist movement sputtered. And I totally believe it.

I could preach all day about welcoming, (don't worry, I won't!)
But being welcomed is an experience not an idea.

(Slide 4: Welcome is an experience)

The best way to learn about welcoming one another in Christ is by being in relationship with one another.

Julie didn't teach me about Christian community by telling me to read a book or giving me a lecture. Julie showed me what Christian community feels like by welcoming me into her small group.

I could talk on and on, but I won't, about what we did in that small group and how much it meant to me, but my words are just pale shadows of my experiences.

Instead I'm going to ask you be a part of an experiment in creating our own experiences of welcoming community here.

In your bulletin is a survey.

So you can tell the me:

- whom you are interested in getting to know better
- When you could make time in your schedule for participating in a small group, and
- What kind of things you would like to learn or do together

I have only one idea that I would really like to do:

we have some youth who need to do confirmation and I would like to invite some adults to share in their faith formation experience. Adults who would like to learn more about Christianity and Methodism and adults who are open to journeying with our youth as they seek to own their faith.

Other than that -- you tell me what you would like to do.

We'll start the welcome experiment in fall.

Children's Message: Welcome

Props: Welcome mat coloring page

What does this look like?

Why do people put welcome mats on their front step?

When someone comes to our home we want them to feel welcome, right?

What are some things that we can do that make people feel welcome to our home?

God also wants people to feel welcome, but God's home is, well, everywhere.

So God asks us to help people feel welcome... everywhere and at church.

I have some welcome mat coloring sheets for you to go with your In Church Today, flyer.
Remember -- if you turn in 5 of these over the summer I will give you a reward!

Let's pray:

Welcoming God, help us to welcome others, as you have welcomed us. In Christ, Amen.