**Series: #Life Together**

VBC

Pastor John Johnson

Romans 16

January 12-13, 2013

**“Creating A Welcoming Ethos”**

 *(Churchwork Assignment—how many identified one expression of love—that fulfills I John 4:7-12?*

*-and how many are being held accountable?) —Read 16:1-16/prayer*

Cultures have different ways of saying *good by and hellos*

-when you pass by the casket at Maori funerals in New Zealand, you are encouraged to speak frankly to the dead person—even mentioning his faults out loud

*-you never returned what you borrowed*

*-you were always late*

*-you could have admitted you can’t multi-task*

-I told you the Broncos would lose

Cultures also have different ways of saying *hello*

-Maori people press their noses together when they greet

-for other cultures—it’s a kiss on the cheek 3 or 4 times

-or pressing a face to a cheek and sniffing deeply

-in Belize—it’s pressing fists together

-in Zambia—it’s gently squeezing a thumb

-in Tibet—it is sticking out your tongue

-in some African cultures—people clap their hands three times before saying hello

-in some Asian cultures—the traditional greeting is—“Have you eaten?”

-in others—it is less intimate—a relaxed salute

-in some—it can be quite stiff—a simple nod

-while in the Mauritius culture—they get to the point—their greeting is simply—“Speak”

-it’s a way of welcoming—something Scripture mandates—*read Romans 15:7*

-“welcome one another” joins a long list of “one anothers”—“mutuality commands”

-non-negotiable obligations that come with being the body of Christ

*-love one another, encourage one another, forgive one another, stir up one another, etc*

1. commands given to Christ followers—that result from His saving work
2. commands that when fleshed out “in a manner worthy of the saints” make us unique from every other community

 -make this a redemptive space where people find salvation, renewal, healing, strength

1. commands that fulfill God’s purpose for His church—

*“God’s aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant”—Dallas Willard*

-but really—do we need a sermon on this command—welcome one another?

-greeting one another seems rather pedestrian—a subject better left to a propriety list in Judith Martin’s *Miss Manners*

-but here’s why we must take it seriously—

1. *Accepting one another is to engage in something more than niceness*

-accepting one another in a manner worthy of the saints goes beyond the superficial

-it’s more than opening a door, extending a handshake, giving a smile—more than “table manners”

1. the “therefore” underscores this

 -it collects everything in the context and then makes this demand—

 -because we are obligated to show affection—12:10

 -accept the weak—14:1

 -carry the weight of those who can’t carry it—15:1

 -not please ourselves—nor live for ourselves—15:1

 -but rather build up our neighbor—15:2

 -and follow Christ’s lead—who lives to reach out to the less strong —15:3

THEREFORE—Be *the* welcoming community of this world—that goes out of its way to extend a welcome to everyone

1. the language used calls for something that transcends free drinks at the café

-to welcome is *to take in, receive towards*

-it is a call to receive people into our space, our community, our vision, our mission—our very lives

-it is not an option

-it is not directed to the church greeters or paid staff

-“one another” means it is the work of everyone

-it’s not a once for all act—the present tense implies that is something ongoing—it never stops

-in sum—it is the antithesis of ignoring, slighting, rebuffing, excluding, rejecting—*and most of us know that pain*—

-a conversation you are not welcome to share in

-a gathering where no one seems to notice your existence

-or really care

-a routine, mechanical, cursory greeting that seems contrived, manufactured, (tortured?)

-acts the church can be rather good at

Illustration—Trinity—greeting Dutch people-genuinely surprised

1. *Accepting one another is to model Christ*

-we are to do it as Jesus does it

-so how does Jesus accept one another?

1. He welcomes the outsider, the unattractive, the undeserving—the leper, the widow, the sinner

 -welcomes those the world might leave out, who didn’t get chosen at recess, invited to the dance

 -those who have gotten blackballed and cold shouldered and voted off the island—*people who sit in economy*

1. He delights in welcoming—for Him it is not mere duty—nor does He endure it with patient resignation

-He actually likes us, loves us

1. He welcomes us deeply, sharing everything with us—

 -adopts us into His family—Ephesians 1:5

 -invites us into a relationship, engrafts us as a branch is grafted into a vine—John 15

 -gives us what He owns—all that He has is ours—He is that generous!

 -He receives us towards Himself every time we approach Him

 -welcomes us with open arms every day we awake

 *-this is the good news of the gospel*

-and tells us to do the same here in 15:7

-for we are in this inseparable union

-His interests are our interests

-meaning that acceptance is a mutual work—*we are the hands and feet of His receptive heart*

1. accept those on the outside—those we may not naturally gravitate to—the odd, the elderly, the young, the ordinary, the undesirable, the different
2. offer to others what has been given to us

-if we place any restraints upon our acceptance of others—we are acting in a way unbecoming of Jesus

-we are hindering Jesus’ welcoming grace

-but more—we are missing this—that to ignore the stranger may be to ignore Jesus

-for this is who He identifies with—Matthew 25

1. *Accepting one another is a way to bring God glory*

-bring Him fame—showcase Jesus—which is our highest purpose

-in such acts—we are doing something supernatural

-we are showing that Christ is in our midst doing something through us

1. *Accepting one another is to make life change possible*

-for welcoming another is the *front door*, the necessary entrance to community, the first and necessary step that moves a person from stranger to belonging

-from outsider to someone engaged—sharing and receiving life

-without acceptance—the experience of life transforming community *cannot* happen

In his chapter, *Welcome One Another*, Gerald Sittser tells the story of “the Elephant Man”

-one we have heard about

-a hideously deformed creature—a freak show in a circus

-until he was rescued by a compassionate doctor

-but transformation did not occur for this man—John Merrick—until he met a widow who fleshed out 15:7

-she wished him a good morning, smiled, *and took his hand in hers*

Sittser notes—

*“this was the first woman who had ever smiled at him, and the first woman, in the whole of his life, who had shaken hands with him. From this day the transformation of Merrick commenced and he began to change, little by little, from a hunted thing into a man.”—Gerald Sittser*

-maybe this is why Paul modeled it in every one of his letters

-he was passionate for the church to move to maturity—and critical to this is to become a community

-so in almost every letter—he sent greetings—relayed greetings by others

-Philippians 4:21—greet every saint—Caesars’s household greets you

-Colossians 4:10—Aristarchus greets you—give my greetings to the brothers in Laodicea

-2 Thessalonians 3:17—this greeting is in my hand—this is how I write (Paul apparently viewed his whole letter as a greeting)

-and in Romans 16—Paul used almost the whole chapter to exhort the church at Rome to live out 15:7

-welcome men, women, poor, professionals, Jews, Italians—

-greet a woman who has sacrificed her possessions for you—verses 1-2

-greet a couple who once risked their necks for me—verse 3

-greet a house church nearby—verse 5

-greet a man dear to me, a new believer

-greet a woman who wearied herself for us, and others who have worked very hard in the Lord—verse 6

-greet fellow prisoners and apostles

-greet a man who has been tested in Christ—verse 10

-the word has something of honor—used to hail a King—Mark 15

-Welcome them! Accept them!

-no more than this—Greet them with a holy kiss—verse 16

Why devote so much space?

1. Paul wanted the church to get this—that when people come in—they must see a huge “WE’RE OPEN” sign

-no matter how diverse

-the chapter is not window dressing—the theologian Emil Brunner once referred to Romans 16 as “one of the most instructive chapters of the NT

-for it’s a final appeal to the church to be Jesus

1. Maybe Paul invested so much space and so much care to this command because this church gathering in Rome did not get it…

-tended to fall short of the community God intended His followers to experience

-tended to walk in with no inclination to reach out to others—look for the stranger

-tended to make it difficult for newcomers to feel welcomed and wanted

-tended to pay attention to the people they already knew—or the ones they wanted to know

-treated the greeting time as a chance to catch up with friends or sit passively waiting for the show to go on

-created small groups as exclusive communities with “no vacancy signs”

-and maybe—in too many cases—we don’t either

-here are some probing questions that will help us know—

1. *is it a normal practice for us to reach out to the stranger in our midst—here at Village?*

 -if everyone lived out this command as you do—would people come back?

 -in other words—how hard is it to break in to this place?

1. *is our welcome perfunctory, formal, distant?*

-how much does our acceptance look like Jesus?

-does our welcome have a Christlikeness that looks different than any other context?

-does it have something of “taking in” another—receiving them?

-is there grace and holiness—a welcome that is godly, sacred, set apart?

-something akin to a holy kiss that conveys some affection

-akin because a holy kiss in our culture may be too uncomfortable—given we do not always know how to convey love physically without it becoming sexual, calculating, or suggestive

-regardless—does our welcome have an unmistakable tone of real love—for people need this?

1. *is our acceptance conditioned by color, personality, interests, background, social status, economics, politics, or religious convictions?*

-do any of these tempt us to exclude, hold back our welcome?

1. *how culturally sensitive are we to what constitutes a true welcome?*

-are we aware of the cultural differences when it come to this command to welcome one another?

-do we know? Do we care?

-to welcome someone of the opposite sex from ME can be offensive if it is physical—like the shaking of a hand

-bowing to an Asian, or shaking with both hands—demonstrates respect

-Latinos—and many Africans—will not settle for a mere hello—embracing is required

1. *will anything change as a result of this call to accept one another?*

CHURCHWORK…

1. pay unusual attention to your greeting this week

-aim to be intentional every time—a gas station attendant, a cashier, your colleagues

-aim to let it reflect Christ

-develop a lifestyle

1. welcome at least one person today