

# A Theme For 1987

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Our God, thank you so much for the children in our midst, for the fact that you have set them in our midst and said, Of such is the kingdom of God. And the problem for us is not that they should grow up to be like us, but that we should learn to be like them.

Grant us the grace to do that. In Jesus' name, Amen. Well, in my great wisdom, I chose, we were reading in the staff meeting through Romans 15 one day, and I thought, that's just the word we need for St. John's for 1987.

And so I'll ask you to turn to Romans 15, verses 1 to 6, which is in your pew Bible, page 154, in the New Testament section of the pew Bible.

And having a, it just was a passage that felt good to me, and certain resonances in it made me say, Ah, yes, that's what we want.

But then this past week, I've been trying to figure out what it really says, and I feel very grateful for what it really says. And I want to share that with you this morning. As I've looked at it and thought about it through this week, I want to share what I think it's talking about, and how I think, by God's grace, it may in fact be a word for us at St. John's in this year of our Lord, 1987.

[ 1 : 3 7 ] Verse 15, chapter 15, verse 1. We who are strong ought to bear with the feelings of the weak, and not to be in ourselves.

And each of us in these neighbors who are good, who are quite like you. Christ is not in these in himself. But as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me.

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may, with one voice, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, what it does is to take a congregation like this and divide it up into the strong and the weak. And in order for you to hear this sermon, you must decide whether you are the strong or the weak.

[ 2 : 5 9 ] And in order to do that, you would probably need to study Romans chapter 14 fairly carefully to decide whether you were among the strong or among the weak.

Now, what Paul talks about in Romans chapter 14, I will leave you to cover, but I'd like to give you a picture of, which is a kind of...

that might not mislead us, but I hope help us to understand.

What he's talking about, the strong and the weak, he says this about them. He says that the weak in the congregation are those who, and this is just a story, because such a thing would never happen.

But he says those who decide that the real Christians come to church at 10 o'clock. If you don't go at 10 o'clock, you're not really a Christian.

[ 4 : 08 ] Those are the weak. They've all decided to go to church at 10 o'clock. It doesn't matter what else you do.

This group of people in the congregation become so enthusiastic about going to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning that they get little buttons to put in their lapels saying, I go to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning.

And after this has gone on for a little while, the congregation begins to break down between the people who invite the other people that go to 10 o'clock service to their homes, and anybody who doesn't go to the 10 o'clock service doesn't get invited.

And when you send out your Christmas cards, you send them to the 10 o'clock peak, because we understand ourselves to be better. And somehow there is something about going to church at 10 o'clock that is really what is at the heart of Christianity.

And soon people begin to say, what is Christianity? Christianity is going to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning. No other time and no other place and no other condition, just that you go to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning.

[ 5 : 25 ] A lot of people who would like to go to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning stop going to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, because they fundamentally don't agree with the people that think, you've got to go to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning.

And so in declaration of their freedom, they stop going at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning. So you can see that in the congregation, a little group builds up who really make this thing very, very important.

Now, the other people are the strong. And the strong know that this 10 o'clock business is a lot of nonsense.

And they know that if your faith is real, then it doesn't matter whether it's 10 o'clock on Sunday morning or 3 o'clock on Monday morning or 7 o'clock on Wednesday evening, it just doesn't matter.

And that faith does not limit itself to one particular time and one particular way of doing things. And so they stop going and they decide that they're going to get their way and they're going to establish that the one thing that you've got to do if you're going to be a Christian is not go to church at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning.

[ 6 : 41 ] And that's how they demonstrate their strength. Now, St. Paul comes along and finds himself confronted with this divided congregation, one of whom insists that this is the way you've got to do it, and another that insists, I don't care how you do it, but it's not that way.

And so you get a fair division going between the two. Well, Paul comes along and says, well, it's not unlike that question.

Let me get back to Paul in a minute. It's not unlike that question that I get all sorts of times. You don't have to go to church to be a Christian. And my only answer to that is, yes, indeed, you don't.

Going to church is not what it means to be a Christian. But what's Paul going to do? One group, if they get away with it, the whole thing is going to tear to pieces.

The other group is going to become so small and so exclusive and so narrow-minded that they're going to forget what the Christian faith is all about. And Paul says, we're going to lose both.

[ 7 : 55 ] So Paul says to them in Romans 15, verse 1, we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the people that think you have to go at 10 o'clock.

In other words, we're prepared not to argue with them about this secondary issue. What we're prepared to do is to recognize that our responsibility is not to please ourselves.

In other words, because we don't like them, we'll avoid them. We're not to please ourselves. We are to please our neighbor. We've got to please those people at 10 o'clock.

We've got to do what is good for them. We have to build them up in the faith which they have grasped so inadequately.

Those three things, Paul says, we've got to do. Listen to them say it. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to edify him.

[ 9 : 05 ] To please your neighbor, work for the good of your neighbor, and build your neighbor up in the faith. That's the responsibility that you have to have.

The strong is to go to the weak who insist on being so 10 o'clock oriented and say to him, yes, I'm not going to argue with you about that.

I'm going to try and do what is good for you. I'm going to try and build you up in the faith. Now that's a point at which a lot of people quit going to church.

They just cannot hack that. They recognize that the weak, wimpy types that go to church regularly just don't understand what the faith is all about.

And in celebration of their great freedom, they never go to church. And so you get caught in between the two places. What do you do about that?

[ 10 : 03 ] Well, Paul says, if you are that strong, demonstrate your strength by not pleasing yourself, by denying yourself.

He says the way you do this is to seek the good of your neighbor and to seek to build him up in the faith. Well, that's what happens often in church.

And that's where I think people miss out on the whole thing. Because they see the church breaking down into secondary causes. And those secondary causes come to be beneath contempt.

And the whole church begins to revolve around them. And you say, I don't want to get involved in them. And so in order to please yourself, you avoid them altogether.

But Paul says, you're not to please yourself. You are to get in and help them. And he gives them these three ways of doing it. The first way, he says, is to look at the example of Christ.

[ 11 : 12 ] He says, Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the reproaches of... when Christians are sort of fish eaters or something like that, Jesus said, I say, the people who come under the contempt of the world in which they live.

He accepts their reproach. He accepts the reproach of being identified as the weak. Even though you are strong, even though you know better, even though you understand the issues better.

Jesus accepted the reproach of those who wear reproach. He identified himself with them. And Paul says, those of you who are strong and know better, who refuse to be caught up in secondary issues, don't prove your case by pleasing yourself and walking away.

Prove your case, prove your strength by seeking to please them, to build them up in their faith, following the example of Christ.

Well, how are you to do this? To follow the example of Christ first? the second way you're to do it is to read the scriptures. For whatever Paul says was written in former days, was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

[ 13 : 02 ] Now, a lot of people look at the church and the disarray in which it finds itself in the fabulous and fantastic 80s of the 20th century where men have found so many new resources and they look at the church and say, if ever I saw a hopeless bunch of people, there they are.

And Paul says, read the scriptures. You'll see that they've always been a hopeless bunch of people.

and you will find there in the scriptures that even in the midst of hopelessness that the scriptures will give you patience and encouragement in that patience and encouragement which will allow you to continue to hope in the face of apparent hopelessness.

from the scriptures you will learn this patience and encouragement as you read it, as you hear it, as you study it, as you submit yourself to it, you will find the patience and encouragement to hope against hope.

To hope in the fulfillment of the promise and purpose of God who has brought together the weak of the earth, brought them into fellowship, and taken those who are strong like you and me, and taught us not to please ourselves.

[ 14 : 40 ] Besides, pleasing yourself is very limited. You can only do it for so long. And you get over it after a while. There's nothing more you can do to please yourself.

But there's almost unlimited opportunity if you set out to please others, to do them good, to build them up in the faith. You have a wonderful challenge that will take all your time and all your energy for the whole of your life.

And so Jesus says, in the scriptures, your hope will be preserved. First thing then is the example of Christ. The second thing is to read the scriptures from which your hope and encouragement will come.

And the third thing is to pray. and Paul prays for them. He prays in these words. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another.

What he's saying is that in the scriptures you find hope, or steadfastness, and encouragement. And that comes from God himself. He's the one who gives it to you.

[ 15 : 54 ] So through the scriptures you are drawing on the resources of God himself in order to have the encouragement and steadfastness that you need.

I looked through some different translations to find out how those words are translated. Steadfastness and encouragement, patience and consolation, endurance, and a father's care for the weak.

Fortitude and encouragement. That is the thing which you discover in the scriptures, the resource of which is God himself.

And drawing on that resource, Paul prays that this might happen. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus.

harmony in an orchestra does not consist in having a thousand trombones or whatever it is.

[ 16 : 59 ] It consists in a piccolo and a timpani and a tuba and a viola and an oboe and a saxophone and a triangle and a xylophone and all of them brought together.

So the strong and the weak and that third row from the back to there and that indomitable character over there and that lady who won't shut up over there and all those things happen in a congregation and on and on they go and they are brought together into harmony through steadfastness and patience which brings hope.

And this harmony then which is what a congregation is all about. Not a congregation which is breaking down because some are weak and hopelessly religious and others are strong and need very little support.

But because out of their concern not to please themselves but to please one another doing good and building one another up they come by the pattern of Christ Jesus in accordance with Christ Jesus into a certain harmony and that the whole life of that congregation we're told will then lead in answer to this prayer to the fact that together they may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That that will happen to them and that they will be brought together in all their diversity in all their strengths in all their weaknesses in all their differences.

[ 18 : 44 ] Having drawn on the steadfastness and encouragement which is told them in the scriptures the source of which is in God they come to a harmony that harmony expresses itself the whole congregation in worship to God not just at 10 o'clock on Sunday morning 24 hours a day every day all day but their life of continuing worship before God and as they seek to serve him together in fellowship in the harmony which they have in Christ Jesus.

You know that there is a there's a terrible falling off between the time people are baptized and the time they grow up. Terrible falling away.

I think this is one of the reasons for some feel strong and able to do it on their own. Others are weak and become kind of religiously dependent.

And Paul says the solution to that is to take seriously the example of Christ and not to please ourselves but to please our neighbor in seeking his good and in building him up in the faith.

And that's the responsibility that godparents have to their godchildren to build them up in that faith to seek their good to bring them by God's grace into harmony with one another to bring them into the congregation that in harmony with the whole of the congregation they may with one voice glorify the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ by the whole of their lives.

[ 20 : 33 ] We are called to that. And that's the those are the verses that I want to make the focus of our life together as a congregation in this year particularly.

And those for those who were baptized I want you to make that the focus of your prayers that the children may grow up into that harmony in fellowship with one another in the study of the scriptures in calling on the resources which God alone can give in following the example of Jesus Christ to become members of a congregation that in harmony with one another offer to God with one heart and one voice the worship which is due to his name.

Amen.