

*Romans 15:4-13
2 Advent / Year A
9 December 2007
Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

I may have told you this story before and if I have, please forgive me, but while reading Romans 15, I recalled an incident that occurred to Johnna and me back while we both were in seminary. I had been working at the Newtown Square Presbyterian Church out at the end of the Mainline from Philadelphia. The Mainline, if you are not familiar with Philadelphia is where the exclusive suburbs are; places like Ardmore, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, Radnor and Marion. Newtown Square was clear at the end where the new moneyed people lived.

At any rate, the pastor of the Newtown Square Presbyterian Church was a member of the Marion Cricket Club and he decided that it would be nice to take Sandra, his wife, and Johnna and me there for lunch after church one summer afternoon. I can still remember how beautiful it was as we drove in through the gates; gorgeous flowers and grass tennis courts, a beautiful club house. The trouble didn't begin until we walked through the front door. Jack, my supervisor, had made a reservation, but when the host or the Maitre De or the steward, whatever you want to call him, saw that I didn't have on a sport jacket, he told Jack that he couldn't seat us. Jack, being the funny man that he is, told the gentleman that I was from Colorado and that people from Colorado don't own sport jackets and then he looked over at me like I was some sort of a hayseed. I told Jack that it was hotter than blazes out and that I didn't think that I needed a jacket.

It turns out that they had a whole closet of jackets there, but they couldn't find one that would fit me. After some negotiating, Jack was able to work out an agreement. So the host got one of those big screens, you know the kind that people dress behind, and he escorted the four of us through the dining room out to a table on the patio but they hid me behind this big

screen as we walked along and once we got to our table, they hid us all behind this big screen so that none of the other guests could see that I didn't have a jacket on. Johnna and I looked at each other like we were in the "Twilight Zone." I must admit, it took a bit of self restraint on both our parts not to start laughing out loud.

Now my family belonged to a country club where I grew up, and I guess it was exclusive in its own way. That is where I learned to play golf. The clubhouse consisted of a men's and women's locker room, a huge bar and a takeout window where you had your choice of a hot dog or a hamburger for lunch. They didn't serve dinner. Don't get me wrong, I loved that place and still hang out there whenever I go home, but the entry gate into Shadow Hills Golf and Country Club consists of a wooden

sign and a cattle grate that you have to drive over. It is also located right next to a uranium processing mill that back during the cold war was cranking out U²³⁸ yellow cake by the trainloads. These trains would pass so close to the seventh tee that when we would see a train coming with raw uranium ore, we would try to chip balls into these open hopper cars as they went past. It is amazing that we all didn't develop cancer in those days.

That is the kind of club that I was used to, so when I ran into the formality of the Marion Cricket Club, I was greatly perplexed. But I was even more astonished by what happened next. After we had been at the table about five minutes, the host, or whatever you call him, came over to me with one of the jackets from the closet. It was too big to fit me, but he put it on the back of my chair. He said that I didn't have to wear it, I just had to have one with me. Once I had a jacket hanging from the back of my chair, he took away the screen and all was well.

That incident 15 years ago got me to thinking about the notion of exclusivity. Have you ever noticed how the word "exclusive" has become a euphemism for the word "luxury" or

“luxurious?” Next time you read an ad in the newspaper or see one on television, look to see if this isn't true. Marketers want to make us feel special, better in some way than the other. Marketers understand that there is a tendency in our human nature to want to congregate with people who are like us. People with greater financial resources like those at the Marion Cricket Club can simply afford to take exclusivity to a more profound level.

There are exclusive groups all around us, fraternities and sororities, athletic clubs, fan clubs, car clubs, travel clubs, community service clubs, and yes churches and religious organizations. Jesus certainly had his favorites; there were the 12 disciples plus his close friends like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and of course his inner circle of Peter, James and John. But while Jesus had favorites, he didn't have any un-favorites. Those who were culturally shunned, like prostitutes and tax collectors got an audience with Jesus; the physically and mentally ill and the lame were not ignored, but sought out. Jesus even longed to gather his antagonists to himself weeping over the Jews of Jerusalem who rejected him. It was on Jesus' example of radical inclusion that Paul staked his exhortation for unity, harmony and deference to the community in today's text from Romans 15. Paul closes his letter to the church in Rome by addressing the Jew-Gentile tensions that existed in their fellowship. There were religious cliques in this church, those who were included and those where excluded.

Paul cites four straight Old Testament references to prove the point that God has no room for disunity or division among his people. God has always asked his people to exist **for one another**. We all understand that we are called to love one another, to love all people and show compassion and kindness to everybody we meet regardless of one's station in life or the prospect of being rewarded for our good deed. It is a spiritual challenge to think and feel from the perspective of another person, especially when that person is hard to love. Yet mature

people of faith find a way to displace themselves from their privileges and rights and place themselves in service to others.

Pastor, writer and teacher Gordon MacDonald has noted in his writings the essence of what separates the church from her culture. “The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church [he says]. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do; it cannot offer grace.” The acceptance, deference, unity and harmony that Paul commends to the church are not natural things, but they are acts of grace. We are all entitled to our inner circle of friends, but if we choose to follow Jesus we will always choose to live by the grace that has not room for exclusion.

This is the message of Advent; it brings hope to all, including the broken and damaged people we meet every day, people Jesus loves and asks us to love. Some of these people actually come into our church. New folks are coming into our parish all the time. Remember to reach out to them and welcome them as your brothers and sisters and be wary of the exclusive cliques that form, even here in our wonderful little Church. In Jesus' Name; Amen.ⁱ

ⁱ The latter part of this sermon is taken largely from one printed in *Homiletics*, November-December 2007, Vol. 19., No. 6 pp. 53 -54.