

“Othering” Romans 15:1-7

Well I don't know about you all, but from time to time I **read** something, or **hear** something, or **see** something that bothers me. It's not an **emergency** or anything, nothing to get hot under the collar about but it rubs me the wrong way, and leaves me feeling a little itchy – kind of like you feel when you are wearing a pair of **wet socks**.

No matter how comfortable you are, you could be on a **hammock in Maui**, but if your socks are wet you are going to be uncomfortable until you get those socks off.

I do the **grocery shopping** most of the time around our place, and I know how much things cost. I went to the **refrigerated section** like I always do, I went to the **dairy part** of the refrigerated section like I always do, I reached for the **cheap yogurt** like I always do but the **price of yogurt has gone up almost 50 cents each**. I still purchased the yogurt, after all it was on the list, but I wasn't happy about it. How can yogurt go up 50 cents each?

Well it felt like wet socks.

Today I want to give you wet socks, I don't want to wear them

anymore, I'm tired of them, so I'm going to tell you what's been bothering me and then **you will have to deal with it.**

This is it: Sometimes people find out I'm a **pastor**, they love to tell me **why they don't need to be a part of a church**, and **why they don't need to be involved with other Christians**. It's what I call the **Lone Ranger** attitude: *“I don't need the church, I just want to do my own thing, believe what I want, I don't need anybody or anything. I am just going to make up my own rules.”*

I've been thinking about that, but I don't want to anymore so **now it's up to you to deal with.**

I suppose it's not such a strange thing **to want to be left alone** – we all need to be left alone sometimes.

At the very least we could have a church that was **a little particular about who got to come**. We could have a church with all our **friends**, where everybody **knew how to act**, the kind of place where people could

finish each others sentences they knew each other so well.

“I remember Mr. Johnson mowing the field out front...”

And then someone else would chime in *“...and he pushed the lawn mower over a bunch of rocks and shot them through the stain glass window into the sanctuary...”*

And someone else would finish, *“...and the preacher thought it was the apocalypse.”*

Everything would be kind of familiar, like your **favorite sweater**.

That's the way it was in **Rome** – it was like the church was one big happy family. That is until, like everything else, the **politicians** **messed it up**.

In the **late 40s AD**, not 1940s, but 0040s, things were a mess in Rome. The Jewish inhabitants were **rioting, broken windows, graffiti**, kind of like the **1960s were in America**. **Caesar Claudius** finally said *“enough is*

enough” and he **kicked all of the Jews out of Rome** – just like that they were all gone.

Just about that time **Christianity spread to Rome** and a group of **Gentile Romans started meeting together as the brand new church in town**. They got along great, they read the **Bible** the same way, and **prayed** together, they knew all of the same **songs**, they knew the way to behave at a **pot luck** and **generally understood each other**.

But then the new **Caesar** took over around **56 AD**, his name was **Nero**. Typical of politicians today, **Nero vetoed what Claudius had done** and **invited the Jews back into town**.

Now the truth is that **most Romans were happy to see the Jews leave and not too happy to see them come back**. But the Jews did come back, and **some of them were Christian**. Since there weren't enough Christians in Rome to have more than one church they started going to the only church in town. The **Gentile Christians weren't very happy to have them back and pretty soon there were arguments and conflicts** over things like how you should **dress** when you go to church, what things were ok to **eat and drink**, and which **holidays** to celebrate and which to avoid. **They just didn't know what to do with each other, they didn't see eye-to-eye on much** – the Jews wanted to **nominate** all of their folk to the

committees and the gentiles wanted to **nominate** all of their folk to the committees and it was a real mess. **How are people that come from such different places supposed to get along?**

It would mean doing what a woman on a plane some months ago described as *'othering'* – ‘othering.’

A **preacher** was taking his seat on an airplane, he was on the **aisle** seat, and a **married couple was in the other two seats**. The husband was at the window and the wife was in the middle. They exchanged **pleasantries**, the **husband went to sleep** and the woman pulled a copy of **Sky Magazine** out of the pocket from the seat in front of her.

She **flipped** through it a little, **fumbled** it, nothing to do.

“What brought you out to California?” she asked the preacher.

“I was preaching at Loma Linda.”

“Isn't that a Seventh Day Adventist church?” she asked.

“Yes” the preacher replied.

“You Seventh Day Adventist?”

“No.”

“Then why were you preaching at a Seventh Day Adventist church?”

“They asked me to come,” the preacher replied, “and I was happy to do it. I preached in their Sabbath service.”

“Oh,” She said, “you were 'othering.'”

“Well,” he said, “I haven't heard it put that way, what do you mean?”

*“You were reaching out to other Christians, you were encouraging others - getting acquainted with and listening to someone **other** than yourself. All our pastor talks about is 'othering,' three times a week it's 'othering' this and 'othering' that – I'm sick and tired of 'othering'! If I hear one more sermon on 'othering' I am just going to scream.”*

“Well, he has a point you know,” the preacher said.

“A little bit sure. But just look here at this magazine. It's Sky Magazine, a few years ago it would have been in English, now its in English, and Spanish, and Japanese. It wasn't always like that, we've done a little too much 'othering' in my opinion. It's just a fad.”

“That's not new,” he replied, “that goes all the way back to the time of Jesus.”

“Where, just show me where.”

He said, “remember the crucifixion? The plaque they put on the cross said 'Jesus of Nazareth: The Kind of the Jews' and it was written in Hebrew,

Latin, and Greek.”¹

The rest of the trip was quiet.

Othering.

Paul wrote to the Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome so that they would do some “**othering**” -
“welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, in order to bring praise to God.”

You know, believe it or not, but when we '**other**' each other, when we **welcome** each other into our lives and into the fellowship of our church we are doing something quite remarkable. **We are witnessing to the way God intends for the world to be; to the way Christ has welcomed us.** In **Romans 15**, Paul gives some practical instruction to the divided Roman church, **instruction that we would do well to heed.** He said, *“don't try to change everybody all the time. There are some things that are really quite*

¹Jn. 19:19-20.

minor things. It's ok to disagree. Instead, help each other, support each other, encourage each other so that the whole church is built up. If you do this, God will unite your heart and voice in praise to God. Listen to each other, even people who feel like wet socks, because God might be trying to tell you something through them.”

The German theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** said that in Christian community **the gospel message materializes for the entire world to see.** We can have all the **best programs and ideas and most charismatic leaders,** but if our **existence as a church is not a visible demonstration of what the Kingdom of God is like, then it is all for naught.** In fact, Bonhoeffer said that it was only God's “*grace*” that **allowed** Christians to **gather visibly in this world to share God's Word.**²

Do you believe that? Do you believe that it is the grace of God that allows Christians to gather together in this life as a foreshadow of the life to come?

Bonhoeffer said:

“It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of

²Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p. 18.

God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”³

Maybe that's why it gets under my skin a little when someone says they **don't need the church** and they **don't need to live in community with other Christians**, because **gathering as God's people is nothing but God's grace**. As someone once said, *“the community of God reflects the character of God.”⁴*

The character of God. Like a **Gentile who welcomes a Jew** with

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ *Treasure in Clay Jars*, p. 99.

open arms, **not just into the church building, but into her life.** Listening, encouraging, even sacrificing the way things used to be or should be to make room for somebody else, to make room for **othering.** Yeah, I guess that is **kind of like God’s character isn’t it?**

God sent Christ for us, to welcome us into the family of God, taking our sin and shame upon Himself, to welcome us on behalf of the Father.

Bonhoeffer wrote: *“When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give;*

*and the more meager our brotherly love, the less were we living by God’s mercy and love. Thus God Himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ.”*⁵

After a **busy semester teaching homiletics at a Seminary in Oklahoma, Fred Craddock** and his wife left the kids behind and went to spend a week in the **Smokey Mountains** of Tennessee. They went to dinner

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

at the **Blackberry Inn**, a relaxing place where one side of the restaurant is a **big glass window** so you can look out and see the mountains.

As they were fumbling through the **menu**, they saw an **elderly, distinguished man** going from table to table making conversation with the diners. Fred **pushed his face into the menu** hoping the man would walk on by – **he was peopled out, this was vacation!**

But, sure enough, *“Are you two enjoying yourselves?”*

In his head Fred said, *“we were...”*

“Yes, thank you, we are having a wonderful time.”

“Are you staying around here very long?”

In his head Fred said, *“not very long...”*

“No, we are just here for a week.”

“Where are you two from? What do you do?”

“I teach homiletics at a seminary in Oklahoma.”

At this the man pulled out a chair, sat down, and said: *“You’re a preacher, huh? Well I’ve got a church story for you!”*

Now this was really starting to get under Fred’s skin, this was **supposed to be vacation**. He’d heard all the preacher stories and church

stories he could ever want to hear, he didn't want to hear anymore.

But the man just started in, “My name is *Ben Hooper*. I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born so I had a hard time. The shame, the reproach, it was awful. When I started to school my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunchtime I'd sit alone in the weeds because the taunts of the children were just too much. When I'd walk around town with my mother, I could feel people staring at me, wondering just who my father was. *The shame that fell on her also fell on me.* They would put their hands to their mouths and whisper but I new what they were saying. My family did not go to church because we were afraid that people would say, *'what are trash like you doing in a holy place like this?'* Even at church, everybody knew who and what I was, they said I was illegitimate.”

“There was a preacher in that town, a big, gruff guy with a scraggly beard. He was scary and intriguing all at the same time. I used to sneak into the church just to hear him preach. I would wait for the sermon to begin to sneak in and I'd leave just as it was ending so that nobody would come up to me and say, *'What's a boy like you doing in church.'* Every Sunday I would

sneak in and sneak out, I was so curious about this rough-looking preacher.”

“One Sunday I was so caught up in the sermon that it ended before I knew it and people were in the aisle and I couldn’t get away. My stomach tightened, I started to sweat, I didn’t want to face the reproach, *‘I’ve got to get out of here, let me through!’*”

“Just then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up and there was that gruff preacher looking down at me. *‘Boy,’* the preacher started, *‘boy you’re the son of..., why, you’re the son of...’*”

And the man said, “I felt all the weight and shame enclose on me like a black cloud. I couldn’t get away, I was trapped, and the preacher was going to expose me for what I was in front of the whole church.”

“*‘Boy,’* the craggy old preacher said, *‘you’re a son of... you’re a son of...why, you’re a son of God. I see the family resemblance.’* And the preacher slapped me on my back and said, *‘Go claim your inheritance.’*”

The old man looked across the table at Fred and said, “*I was born that day.*”

“*That’s an amazing story,*” Fred said, “*what did you say your name was again?*”

“*Ben Hooper*”

“*Ben Hooper... Ben Hooper...Yes, my grandfather told me that on*

two occasions the people of Tennessee elected a man born out of wedlock as their governor, and his name was Ben Hooper!”

The man just told a story about a church. No, no, no, I take that back, he told The Story.