

LIVING TO BLESS OUR NEIGHBOR**Romans 15:1-7**

Intro: Ed Koch was the mayor of New York from 1977-1989 and he was always good for a funny sound bite. He could be flamboyant and had the reputation of being a people person. He would ride the subway in New York to mix with the populace and would ask fellow riders, “How’s my doing?” One time in a conversation with a particular woman, he was going on about himself and finally he said to her, “*But enough of me. Let’s talk about you. What do you think of me?*”

He put into perfect words a basic human failing – our inability to see past ourselves. My generation, the Baby Boomer generation, those of us born roughly between the end of World War Two and 1965, have the distinction of being called “The Me Generation”. The fountain of information we call Wikipedia says this about those of us who fit those years: “*The “Me” generation is a term referring to Baby Boomers in the United States and the self-involved qualities associated with this generation. . . The phrase became popular at a time when “self-realization” and “self-fulfillment” were becoming cultural aspirations to which young people supposedly ascribed higher importance than social responsibility.*” Another telling description of this generation is narcissism. Not too pleasant, is it? Not a good reputation to have, but we do. And now we are the parents and grandparents, and great grandparents of several more generations who have learned and absorbed our self-centeredness well. We know very well how to look out for number one.

That is diametrically opposite of what we learned from Jesus, . . . *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Philippians 2:6-8 (ESV). Instead of being self-absorbed and living only for ourselves we must be living to bless our neighbor. This is a key to building one another up. It is what will build a strong church for Kingdom impact.

Our text for today from Romans 15 helps us with this – but for some contextual background: Paul has spent the better part of Romans 14 teaching on the responsibility we have to one another and how we must subsume our own rights in an effort to strengthen those who are weaker and newer or less sure of their faith. The struggle for many Christians in those days was eating food, especially meat that had been offered to pagan gods. This meat was not eaten by the gods because, **THEY WEREN’T REAL** no matter how scary they looked. They were mere manmade idols and figments of the imagination, so the food offered to them would rot on the altar. Unless, of course, you had an entrepreneurial flare and got the bright idea to sell the “used” food at a discount. It was a good deal for poor people. It might be the only way a family could have meat at all. So, some people ate the supposedly tainted meat. For some people this was okay. They knew the gods weren’t there and the meat was fine. Others felt it was a sinful act. Paul was simply assuring the stronger Christ Followers to concede to the weaker Christ Followers in the interest of unity. This was a way of blessing others. It was a way of strengthening the Church. The word used here to describe the weak Christians in Romans 14 describes a weak and shallow and unsure faith. But in Romans 15:1-7, which I’m going to finally read here in a minute, the word used for “weak” is that which describes a vulnerability of any kind in anyone. We who are strong in our faith need to be to minister to the failings of the weak in an effort to be Jesus to the world and to build up the Kingdom. Let me read it and we will look at it a bit:

(Read Romans 15:1-7)**We, the strong, are under obligation to bear the weaknesses of the not strong**

- That is how Romans 15:1 reads literally if you translate directly from the original language. And it's not an arrogant statement, sometimes people just haven't sorted things out yet in the way that we have, or in the same way that we have.
- Romans 14, as I pointed out already, deals with the responsibility of Christ Followers to have patience and understanding and forbearance with one another. One person might not have any issue with consuming something that the other might see as harmful or sinful. It was just meat. The idols hadn't done anything to it, but for some it was terrible. So Paul was saying don't cause your brother or sister in Christ to stumble because of the fact that you want to have a beef steak that was brought out of a temple. There are many parallels in this society. Some believe that drinking coffee is wrong. Some people believe that drinking alcohol is wrong. Those who do not believe that way should not cause the others to stumble by imbibing in what they see as

sinful. Why cause them to judge you? Why cause them to sin by being angry at you when you simply do not need to have it? If it is going to cause another to stumble, don't do it in their presence.

- But here in Romans 15 Paul is continuing with his thought that we need to be responsible for one another and that we need to build one another up. There it is! Our theme for this series, building one another up. So we might be stronger or at least consider ourselves stronger. (It's important that we don't let that go to our head because our mission is to love on one another and help others along in their walk with Christ) Kenneth Foreman writes that we need to *"take the moral considerations out of the rule book and consider it in the light of the divine love. No human problem has been seen right until it has been seen in the light of God. No human problem can be wisely approached and solved apart from applying the principal of love. There will always be differing opinions, but they should not mar the harmony Christians enjoy with one another and in accord with Christ Jesus."*

We quite literally have a duty to one another

- William Barclay puts it this way. *"A Christian fellowship should be marked by the consideration of its members for each other. Always their thoughts should be not for themselves, but for each other. And not in an easy going, sentimental laxity. It must always be designed for the other person's good and for his upbuilding in the faith."* (There it is again!) He goes on: *"It is not the toleration which tolerates because it is too lazy to do anything else. It is the toleration with which knows that a man may be won much more easily to a fuller faith by surrounding him with an atmosphere of love than by attacking him with a battery of criticism."*
- Loving one another doesn't mean giving in to or accepting or approving their sin and weak decisions. Instead it means walking along with the weaker person until they gain their own strength. I think it was Barclay who writes, *"It is always better to be right with God and to suffer, than to be wrong with men and to avoid trouble."*
- Yes, there will be differences of opinion and arguments and debate but Christ Followers will hear one another out because they know that what they have in Jesus, who unites them, is greater than any difference which may divide them. In other words, blessing our neighbor can get messy sometimes, but we strive to work with one another. So that means YOU might need to concede and tamp down what you know to be true or best as you lead a weaker brother or sister. Don't hear what I'm not saying, Paul is not instructing us to give in or allow sin or even tolerate sin – but he IS saying that we need to bring people along who are struggling with sin and as we do the will gain strength in their walk with Christ.
- Here's the point, we need to . . .

Put other people first!

- This is a difficult thing in our culture. Look at those first two verses again, *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.* Romans 15:1-2. Instead of using our "strength" to please ourselves, we need to use it to serve our sisters and brothers in Christ. In fact we are even to use our strength for those who are not yet Christ Followers and in so doing we are a witness to the grace of God of which we have also been recipients.
- This goes against the way the world thinks which tells us to "look out for number one". As a matter of fact our culture often looks with contempt for, or even suspicion on, those who live lives of real sacrifice for the sake of others. When you act in a way that is sacrificial, more than likely, you will be asked, incredulously, "Why are you doing this?" It's just not fathomable for many beaten down people to be extended love and grace.
- But we need to put other people first. It's undeniable here, that Paul is saying that the way to true happiness and fulfillment in life is to get your eyes off of yourself, start building others up. It's the exact opposite of the Me Generation. And as we do it we are not spending ourselves as much as we are finding that we, ourselves, are being built up in the process.

Conclusion: How do we do it? Not on our own strength for sure. We don't have it in us. Our own egos will make sure that looking out for the weaker person will be an exercise in self-inflation or resentment. No, living to bless our neighbor is only through the work that the Holy Spirit does in us. (Since this is the Day of Pentecost, it is an apt reminder that we can do nothing apart from what the Holy Spirit does through us).

It's all about Jesus and to glorify God the Father. We accomplish that being unified as his people. Let's build one another up by living to bless our neighbor. Amen.