



*LINK ARMS: “The Wide Welcome”

Bible Text: Romans 15:1-7

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The first few weeks of summer were like a whirlwind – and not because of cool breezes blowing. * The start of summer was hot, hot, hot, hot, HOT. It’s been great to get some relief from the too-early summer heat the last couple of days. *

No, the whirlwind has been all good things, * but some of us are still recovering from Vacation Bible School, Annual Conference, the Youth Mission trip leaving early this morning. Again, all good things.

* But I’ve been doing some thinking about Vacation Bible School and the children we serve each year. * We are blessed to have created, thanks to Karen and Michele and more than a hundred volunteers* each year, a great big, wide open door to children and their families. * So, let’s celebrate that work we do that is surely the work of God!

***Old Mission’s Vacation Bible School reaches 175-200 children a year - around 65-70% of them come from the wider community - and half of all those families and children have no Church home.**

It is a blessing and joy to show them the love of God. I’m sure no one here has ever asked what an, older and grumpier Associate Pastor once asked in a Church I served 20 years ago. * He asked me, *“Just how many of them are our children?”* And, for once I found the right words at the right time, and * answered, *“All of them.”*

I learned those words from Rev. Janet Wolf*, who in 1993 was appointed to the Hobson Memorial Methodist Church in Nashville. It’s all white membership was declining, like their neighborhood.

*It was a Church with nothing really going for it, except Janet Wolf's vision for creating a multiracial Church in the heart of the city!

There were no children at Hobson. But they worked with *Habitat for Humanity* to help built homes adjacent to the church, and built a shared playground by the sanctuary. And children began to show up.

One of Janet's long-term members at Hobson came to her when children from the streets started coming to worship. She said, ****"Rev. Wolf, they just aren't our children."*** Of course, she was right.

Their children had long ago grown and gone, and if any of their grandchildren went to church at all it sure wasn't at Hobson. They didn't look like their children at all. But Janet said ****"Alice May, they may not be like your children or my children, but they sure enough are God's children!"*** And Alice May said, ***"Why yes they are."*** *

Of course, they were! Jesus said, in Matthew 18:5, ***"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me."***^{1*}

Could we do more to extend our welcome and the love of God? Of course, we could! *We have incredible people, talents, strengths, and economic abilities. Imagine if we caught a bigger vision!

Dr. Craig Barnes says we need to begin to answer the question: ****"What is the Good News for the strong?"*** People come to Church with incredible strengths, and all we usually expect you to do is put a tiny bit of money in the offering plate and spend an hour of worship once every month or so. We could ask more of you.

*That's like keeping a one-ton, four-wheel drive, 400 horse power pickup truck in your garage just to haul a gallon of bathroom paint home from Menards or Home Depot every year or so.

¹ Matthew 18:5, New International Version®, Copyright ©1973-2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

The good news for the strong is that **we are not designed to live like that. We are to use our capacities for the work of God!*

Verse 1 in our **text from, Romans 15: ****“We who are strong ought to support weak, and not live just to please ourselves.”****²

Verse 2: **“Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building them up.”*³ That’s God’s “good purpose.”

**We have a responsibility to “love our neighbor as we love ourselves,”* Jesus said, in Luke 10. When he was asked, *“And just who is my neighbor?”* Jesus talked about the Good Samaritan.

Verse 3 says: **“For Christ did not live to please himself...”*⁴ But there is more than that in the text. He is not only our example; he has reminded us that how we treat others reflects the love we have for him. The verse continues: **“It is written, ‘Those who insult you, insult me.’”*⁵ Whenever we insult or harm one of the last, the lost, or the least of these (**remember Matthew 25:40?*) - we do it to him.

Verses 5 and 6 call us to find community with one another, despite all differences, **“May Christ grant you to live in harmony with one another ... so that you might live to the glory to God!”*⁶

And verse 7 calls us to offer the widest welcome possible to all the children of God, because Christ has welcomed us with arms as wide as the love of God! **“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*⁷

****Turns out the Bible has a lot to say about welcome.***

² Romans 15:1, paraphrased from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible by the author.

³ Ibid. Romans 15:2, paraphrased by the author.

⁴ Ibid. Romans 15:3, paraphrased by the author.

⁵ Ibid. Romans 15:3.

⁶ Ibid. Romans 15:5-6, paraphrased by the author.

⁷ Ibid. Romans 15:7, paraphrased by the author.

God's arms are wide open to people of every walk of life.

In the United Methodist Church, we are continuing our internal struggle over who can be ordained and whether same gender couples can marry in Church, neither of which Jesus addressed. But he was crystal clear about how wide our welcome should be.

Again, our text, has this powerful invitation: **“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you...”*⁸

Luke 15:2 says that Jesus was criticized, not for his love for God, but for his love for others: **“The Pharisees and the Scribes grumbled and said of Jesus, ‘Look how he welcomes sinners and eats with them...’”*⁹ He welcomed people - well - people like some of us.

When we welcome others we never know just who it might be.

Hebrews 13:2: **“Do not neglect to welcome strangers, in doing so you may be welcoming angels unaware...”*¹⁰

And listen again to Matthew 18:5: **“Whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me.”*¹¹ And Mark 9:37: **“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”*¹² And Luke 9:48: **“Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me.”*¹³

Are you picking up the *Biblical theme, the focus of the Word?

My message today came to me during this week, when the *spotlight has been on the heart-wrenching treatment of children and families at the Southern border of the US.

We have to do better, don't we? For the love of God, don't we?

⁸ Ibid. (Romans 15:7)

⁹ Ibid. Luke 15:2, paraphrased by the author.

¹⁰ Ibid. Hebrews 13:2, New International Version.

¹¹ Op. Cit. Matthew 18:5, New International Version.

¹² Mark 9:37, New Revised Standard Version Bible, Copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ USA. Used by permission.

¹³ Luke 9:48, New American Standard Bible. Copyright © 1960-1995 by the Lockman Foundation, La Habra, Calif. All rights reserved.

Laura Bush, former First Lady, agrees. She said: **“I live in a border state, and understand the need to protect borders. *But separating children from their parents is immoral. And it breaks my heart.”*

A lot of her fellow United Methodists are right there with our former First Lady.) **I certainly am.** We must do better. Every child is precious to God. Every parent and grandparent knows this.

**When our youngest son John was a baby, one day his fever spiked, and he went into febrile seizures. And we were beside ourselves.*

I was shaking like a leaf all the way as we rushed him to the hospital. And I was praying, **“Not my child, Lord please, not my child.”*

But in my heart came the small gentle insistent voice of God;
** “Not any of my children, no, not any of my children...”*

His voice is still speaking today. Those with ears, let them hear.

Amen.