

Pursuing Peace, Living Hope

Romans 14:13-19

Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese

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There are so many stories and events from around the world that can leave us feeling hopeless and discouraged. These stories, which we hear and see on the news and internet, which we read in the papers, are all about what's wrong in the world, where the latest natural disaster has happened, how many casualties there were in the most recent terrorist attack or war. Hearing these stories time after time, can de-sensitize us to the pain in the world, and can also leave us feeling powerless--there are so many places in our world in need of peace and hope, and we can't possibly respond to them all, or even make a difference.

And the same can be said of the situation in Colombia--the problems in that country are so long-standing and so complex, that there isn't a whole lot we can do. And it feels so far away, that unless we go there, what could we possibly do that can make a difference?

I wonder if Paul felt the same way, communicating with a congregation in a city he wasn't in. Would his words make a difference? Would the congregation in Rome understand what he meant? The passage that was read this morning is part of a longer section in Romans that talks about the implications for how the church is to live its faith--chapters 12-15 deal with the practicalities of the Christian life, whereas the first 11 chapters laid the theological foundation for Christian life and faith. Of particular issue in chapter 14 is the debate over what food can be eaten and by whom. While all food is clean, Paul asserts that if someone in the community might be led astray if they saw others eating food that they believed to be unclean, then the rest of the community should refrain from eating that food, so as not to lead the "weaker" member to sin by eating what they deem sinful. (We may hear the term "weaker" member in a negative way, but Paul was referring to weaker in the sense of someone in this case, not seeing all food as clean. In various ways, we take turns being the weaker and the stronger members of the body--there are some issues in which we are weak in faith, and others in which we are strong. Paul is encouraging us to be mindful of those who are weak when we are strong, and that we shouldn't lead them astray.) Rather than passing judgement on what others rightly or wrongly believe, they need to see themselves as part of the same body, worshipping the same Christ who died and lives again so that all would live. It is not up to us to judge, but each person will be accountable to God for their own lives and actions.

"Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another." (v 13) These verses in Romans 14 encourage the Roman congregation to find ways to build each other up, rather than causing one another to stumble. They are to live in ways that make life easier for another, not more difficult. "If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no

longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died." (v 15)

Paul's goal is to build up the body of believers, to help the members of the congregation see themselves as part of something bigger than they are. Faith and belief aren't just about what I believe, or what I think is right or wrong; it is about placing ourselves and our beliefs and actions alongside those of others in this larger body, that determines how we live. Community is about each of us giving up something out of love for another.

I think these verses also remind us that our community extends beyond our local congregation, and even beyond our national borders. Our community, our brothers and sisters, include those living in Colombia, who are living with injustice and violence. Colombia may be far away, but this particular community in Chocó is part of our global Anabaptist community. That brings them a little closer to us, and in a small way makes their story our family story.

And so today, we open ourselves to hear their stories, to pause and listen and pray for those who face difficult situations. We think of those whose daily lives are vastly different from our own; and we offer our own prayers for justice and peace for them. In our prayers and in our remembering, we stand with them in spirit and strive to pursue that which makes for peace and mutual up building. For the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy--according to Paul, that is the most important thing in our life together. That is how we serve Christ and bring in the kingdom of God.

The people of Colombia live with a hope that those of us from afar maybe find baffling and hard to understand. And yet, time and again, as I have heard the stories of Christians in Colombia, the theme that runs through them is one of hope and resilience. The verses that were included in the Days of Prayer and Action worship resources for this year speak to that hope: Romans 12:18--If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all; Romans 14:19--Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building; and Romans 15:13--May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians in Colombia know what it is to suffer, and yet they profess a deep and abiding hope in the midst of that suffering. They know what it is to suffer, and yet they see how God accompanies them in their suffering and in their work for justice and peace.

When I think about the state of hopelessness many people are feeling about MC USA, and then think about the hopefulness I hear coming from our brothers and sisters in Colombia, I'm brought up short. The challenges our denomination is facing pale in comparison to the life and death struggles of our faith family in Colombia. Yet, they feel hopeful, and we despair. I'm not sure what to do about this, but I do think it is even more important that we hear these stories of suffering and hope so that we can gain some perspective on our own situation. I'm not saying that unless suffering is totally huge and

unjust, that it doesn't count--when we suffer, even if it isn't "as bad as" someone else's, it is still suffering for us. So, I'm not discounting how difficult the division is in our denomination, but we, all of us in North America, can still trust that our crops aren't being sprayed, that we're not being forced into making a living that goes against our beliefs, that our very livelihood is not being threatened. We in North America are free to determine the course of our days. Hearing these stories helps us remember that our challenges as a church are related to theological differences, not physical life and death struggles.

A Canadian Mennonite Brethren delegation visited the Mennonite Brethren in Chocó, and in the blog of their trip (<https://mennocolombia2013.wordpress.com/>) commented on the faith and belief of the people of this region:

They have a Christo-centric orientation to life that refuses to separate theology from everyday life; and the Bible is part of everyday decision-making in the face of state-sanctioned or state-ignored violence--they take the teachings seriously and apply them faithfully to their daily lives.

One writer called on "both MCC Canada and the Canadian Conference of MB Churches in Canada to consider an opportunity to pattern [their] institutional relationships after what [they] have observed in Colombia. Christ remains the centre around which all relationships flow." This delegation recognized that we need our global brothers and sisters to help us understand more fully what it means to be devoted followers of Jesus Christ. We need each other because we can't follow alone, in isolation from the needs of others. Our sisters and brothers in Chocó have felt isolated from the global Anabaptist family; we need to hear their stories of suffering and hope as a witness to what it means to follow Jesus; they need to know that we know their stories and are remembering them and praying for them. And that we are doing what we can to pursue peace.

And so, I am grateful for the faithful witness of our sisters and brothers in Chocó; a witness that trusts in the sure and abiding presence of God; a witness that can see life and hope beyond the despair of today. So let us pursue that which makes for peace, in our own community and beyond, and that which is characterized by mutual up building, for the kingdom of God is righteousness, and joy and peace.