

ATTRIBUTES OF A CONGREGATION

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Another year of worship, fellowship and activity has past and today we plan to meet after service for our Annual Meeting. We can view this event as one more meeting or an important time to gauge the health and vigour of our congregation. Personally, I view it more as the latter.

St. Paul in his letter to the Church in Rome which we know as the Book of Romans speaks clearly and eloquently about the marks of a congregation's health. Paul asks the question: What are the attributes of a good fellowship? He answers this question by going on to list the attributes which from his point of view are critical in a congregation of Christ's church. Paul was the great organizer and understood the difficulty of bringing together people from all walks of life and nationalities as a community of new Christian believers. Paul believed that this was possible and indeed was Christ's desire for his church.

Let me share some of these insights from Paul in the 15th Chapter of Romans. Writer William Barclay has assisted us in understanding these passages and constitutes the basis of my words here today.

In previous chapters, Paul set out the two Christian aims within the fellowship of believers. The first aim states Paul is the aim for peace. This aim for peace presupposes that the church members should be in right relationship with each other. A church where there is strife and contention, a church where there are quarrels and bitterness, a church where there are divisions, has lost all right to the name of church according to Paul.

The second aim within the fellowship of believers is the aim of upbuilding one another. The image of the church as a building runs through the New Testament. The members are the stones within the building. Anything that loosens the fabric of the church is against God; anything that makes the fabric stronger and more secure is of God. Unless a church is a body of people who, in love, support, uplift and consider one another, it is not the church Christ envisioned.

After Paul speaks of peace and the need for active upbuilding as the key aims for the church, he moves on to Chapter 15. Here he discusses the key marks of a Christian fellowship. I believe these are instructive reminders to us as we create and sustain a caring congregation on the West Hill of Belleville.

The first mark of Christian fellowship is consideration of its members for each other. Our thoughts should not be for ourselves but for each other. Here he does not speak of an easy-going sentimental caring but a genuine interest and consideration for each person in their life and faith journey.

The second mark according to Paul of the congregation should be the study of scripture collectively as well as individually. It was with this in mind that the church created the lexicon of scripture readings for the Christian year for clergy and worship leaders to follow in worship. The lexicon exposes us to the scriptures, both the easy and the difficult passages. These readings which also should inform and be the basis of the preaching gives us a record of God's dealing with a nation and relates the great and precious promises of God. Paul in our day would urge each Christian to open and read the Bible and glean the treasures to be found therein. As an aside you may recall the old saying about the Bible in many homes where the Bible sits on the shelf. The saying is this: "the Bible we trust and dust." Paul would urge us to dust the Bible off and open it up and read.

The third mark of Christian fellowship is fortitude. Here Paul uses a Greek word which means more than patience. It is a triumphant adequacy which can cope with life, the strength which does not only accept things, but in accepting, transmutes them into glory. This is certainly not being a victim of circumstance; it is the active living with reality and making it work.

The fourth mark is hope; the Christian fellowship should be marked by hope. Christians should be realists but never pessimists. The Christian hope is the hope which has seen everything and endured everything, and still has not despaired, because it believes in God. The Christian hope is not only in human effort but in the power of God.

Paul's fifth mark of Christian fellowship is harmony. A church may have everything one could ask for in physical plant, music, equipment, etc. but if the fellowship lacks harmony, it has lost and lacks an essential ingredient. There may be difference of opinion and discussions and debates of varying viewpoints, but the fellowship solves these issues within the living and worshipping community. The Christ that unites Christians is and should be remembered to be greater by far than the differences which may divide us.

Praise is Paul's sixth mark of the Christian fellowship. Is our congregational voice grumbling discontent or cheerful thanksgiving? We can ask the same question about each of us – grumblers or cheerleaders? The Christian according to Paul should enjoy life because he or she enjoys God. As Paul was heard to say, God is working all things together for good. Our life together in the congregation should be a witness to this belief that with God all is possible.

Paul's final point in this passage about the Christian fellowship is that we as individuals and we as a community of faith take our pattern and example, our inspiration and our dynamic from Jesus Christ. When the Lord of Glory chose to serve others rather than please himself, Jesus set the pattern which every one who seeks to be his follower must accept and willingly follow.

Later in Chapter 15, Paul reiterates the marks of an inclusive church, one where people of all walks of life can sit together as members of Christ's body.

Again he speaks of hope. He says there is something in Christian hope that nothing can kill. That something he proclaims is the conviction that God is still alive. No man is hopeless so long as there is the grace of Jesus Christ; and no situation is hopeless so long as there is such a thing as the power of God.

Then Paul speaks of joy. Here he does not mean pleasure but the joy that comes from our consciousness of the living presence of the living Lord, the certainty that nothing can separate us from the love of God as we have seen in Jesus our Lord.

Then Paul again speaks of peace, the peace that comes from knowing nothing can separate us from the love of God. And then there is another peace, the peace that comes knowing that by ourselves we can do nothing; but with God all things are possible.

Paul's description of the Christian fellowship applies as much today as it did in his time 2000 years ago. Here at St. Matthew's we have a history that includes amalgamation between two churches and two congregations. We are the beneficiaries of the faith of those with the courage to come together to form a new entity.

Let us resolve to continue to struggle to be the Christian fellowship Paul describes and indeed be the fellowship he describes. Paul would happily say to us today as we hold our Annual meeting:

If God be for us, who can be against us?