

“Open Doors: Building ‘REAL-ationships”
Rom. 12:9-16; 1 Tim. 3:14-15

Chan Willis – F.P.C.-L.C./Welsh
March 8, 2020

“A Catholic priest, a Presbyterian minister, and a Methodist audiologist walk into a bar.” Sounds like the lead-in to a type of joke that most of us have heard. The *really* funny thing is, this is NO joke! This is a true story. Well, except for the bar part. Sort of. It was actually a reception at a hotel. Let me explain...

Thursday afternoon my friend and colleague in Welsh, Fr. Alan Trouille, rode up to Natchez MS to attend a training seminar for leadership of this region of the Rotary Club. At dinner that night, we shared a meal with a group that consisted of: a cousin of Alan’s from Lafayette; 2 African-American ladies from New Roads (one of whom was a Baptist youth minister); an older couple from Opelousas, the wife being our District Governor Elect; and that afore-mentioned audiologist, a young father of two from Sulphur. WHO, after volunteering to offer up the blessing (and doing a very nice job), would share that he attended Henning UMC. His name, btw, was ‘Jake.’ You know, as in ‘Jake... from State Farm.’ Which was exactly the way he introduced himself! He even related how he was having a phone conversation with a supplier for his practice, and he could hear the lady on the other end of the line put her hand over the phone ‘whisper’ to a co-worker, ‘It’s Jake... like from State Farm!’

ANYWAY, later that evening Fr. Alan, Jake, and I were standing around talking at the reception, near the ‘beverage station,’ and we shared a good laugh about how we actually *were* a living example of a joke about a Catholic priest, a Presbyterian minister, and a Methodist Doctor (well, of sorts). And believe me, it was just one of MANY times that the three of us would share in the gift of laughter over the course of the weekend. In fact, many of those at dinner the first night also went out to ‘eat, drink and be merry’ the following evening as well. SO, while the training was OK, the fellowship was OUTSTANDING!

THE POINT? Yes, there is one. The point is that my expenditure of time was SO worth it because of the **relationships** formed by a very diverse group of people ‘randomly’ put together. (I’d prefer to say, ‘providentially.’) Black, white. Young, old. Catholic, Protestant. Like the Words of Institution for Communion sometimes say, we came ‘from North, South, East, and West to gather at Table.’ And to no small degree, irregardless of any service organization connection,

what made us such 'hard and fast friends' was our common FAITH... what we all share at THE 'Table.' That even over an adult beverage or two, we could share openly, freely, joyously, about our experiences in our varied Christian churches. Those friendships that we forged in just a matter of hours were **genuine. Sincere. REAL.**

And it made me think about how we ALL are to be open to God's leading in forming such bonds with others. Whether its with fellow church members we've 'known' for many years... or someone we are just getting to know. That one of the greatest JOYS in life should be in the growing closer in the 'fellowship of the saints'... fellow believers who are also broken sinners just like us. Whether walking down a hallway or walking into a bar, you and I should be continually passing through the '**Open Doors**' that lead to **Building REAL-ationships.**"

Today's passage from Romans was FILLED with different aspects of what it means to share in a friendship that is healthy, and Godly. And from that passage we will consider 5 Qualities of Genuine Fellowship that we should model both inside the church and outside these doors. One is...

AUTHENTICITY. To be REAL. In Paul's words, "**Let love be genuine.**" (*Romans 12:9*) "Sincere." "Without hypocrisy." There's that word that gets bantied around so much as a criticism of the church. As is pointed out in Rick Warren's study, "Time to Dream," the word 'hypocrite' comes from the Greek for an **actor**. One who, in ancient Greek plays, would wear a **mask** to play different roles, in order to HIDE their true identity. I have seen a very poignant dramatization of a person who would sit on a stool with a white mask covering their face, while a narrator read as though speaking the thoughts of the person, about why they wore a mask to hide their true selves. Not wanting anyone to see the pain, the depression, the struggle that the person was really going through. Know people like that? To some extent, cannot we ALL, at various times, hide behind masks of 'deception' and 'deflection?' Depending on which 'side' of the mask we are on, we must either strive to be more perceptive and genuine in our concern for the other, OR more sincere and open with our own struggles, in order to allow those whose love for us IS genuine to enter in and walk with us. There is no greater compliment we can give to another than to ask to join with them on their journey... or allow someone else to. It just requires an 'open door'...

The next one is **COURTESY**... a word that can nowadays be more associated with getting a ride while your car is in the shop than for using a different type of 'repair tool'... One verse from the reading in Romans that can relate to the importance of **courtesy** in strengthening relationships is v. 10: ***"Love one another with mutual affection."*** (Romans 12:10) One most important way we show 'mutual affection' and 'courtesy' is by LISTENING. NOT just 'hearing'. But by actively listening. AND, not by listening just long enough to figure out how you are going to 'fix' the other person. But just to acknowledge that what they're saying is important. No judgement. No criticism. Simply listening to show the other person **respect**... that what they think and say has value.

At one of the breakout sessions at the conference, a speaker named Donna Landry (who was actually a former student of Jim Wright) was leading a discussion of "public perception" (which had a lot of relevance for the church as well as a civic organization). Unfortunately, two guys in the back of the room were having a rather extensive 'sidebar' conversation. And I don't mean just about where to go to dinner that night. They must have had a 5 minute conversation in the midst of this lady's presentation... that no matter how much I cleared my throat, they just couldn't catch the hint of how rude they were being. Afterwards, no matter how much I wanted to share my displeasure with them, I did not... tho' I did apologize on behalf of the group for their lack of 'courtesy.' I was reminded that what we used to refer to as 'common courtesy,' 'common decency,' and 'common sense' are no longer 'common.' In paying others the 'courtesy' of 'respect, we should remember the 'holy ratio' I've spoken of before... we have two ears and one mouth, so listening is TWICE as important as speaking...

By showing others **courtesy**, we demonstrate a closely related quality: **MUTUALITY**. That we are there for one another. What we do to say to another person 'I got your back.' Verse 10 goes on to say ***"Outdo one another in showing honor."*** (Romans 12:10) Or in the words of the NIV, ***"Honor one another above yourselves."***

You may have heard of a TV series "New Amsterdam." Max, the Medical Director for a large urban hospital in NYC, has gone through a lot, particularly the loss of his wife in childbirth after a fatal ambulance accident. But throughout all the trials that he has continued to say to those he works with the mantra he has repeated since Day 1: ***"How can I help?"*** 4 simple words

to understand... but not so simple to SAY. How much better a world would we have if more would say those words more often? In a culture when it can be so much about SELF, how might we be 'counter cultural' in 'honoring one another above self?' Perhaps by saying something as 'simple' as 'How can I help?'

The fourth one is one that we all can appreciate, both in giving and receiving: **HOSPITALITY**. It is defined simply as "the **friendly** and **generous** reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers." The Scriptures particularly speak to how such 'entertainment' cares for the needs of others: "**Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.**" (Romans 12:13) As I read this word, for some reason the word 'hospital' jumped out at me. A place you go for healing, for care, from people that you most likely do not know. People whose purpose is bring you back to health and wholeness.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the two evening meals that Fr. Alan and I shared with our new 'C.F.F.'s' ('Christian Friends Forever') was that BOTH of the tabs for the whole table were picked up by one of our new friends... that were heretofore 'perfect strangers.' WHY? Because of special bond that they felt. Friendly, generous act that really brought us together. Made us more WHOLE, because of the love we felt for one another. Through those two guys acts of HOSPITALITY, we experienced the 5th aspect of genuine fellowship...

UNITY. "**Live in harmony with one another.**" (Romans 12:16) Now THERE are two words that can be pretty hard to come by in our day and time. UNITY. HARMONY. In some other words of Paul on this subject, he said "**Let there be real harmony so that there won't be divisions in the church... be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.**" (1 Cor. 1:10)

As you have likely noticed 😊, I had a GREAT time at the Rotary training event. But I can tell you, it really WASN'T much because of anything I heard in those training sessions. Rather, it what I experienced at TABLE. A diverse group from different backgrounds and traditions that came together and enjoyed each others company because we celebrated the UNITY we had as the larger body of Christ. **One Lord, one faith, one baptism**. Because we saw what we were doing in a civic organization to be an extension of our life of FAITH. The service to which we are called in THIS place must be put into practice in 'THOSE' places (in the world outside our doors).

Those beautifully unique people I met over dinner(s) were ‘united in thought and purpose.’ We were **authentic**... no ‘masks’ to hide behind. What you see was what you got. We were **courteous**... respecting where the other was coming from. Listening without fixing. We demonstrated our **mutuality**... being there for one another. That what we held in common was light years ahead of whatever differences we had. We enjoyed the **hospitality** of the saints... who were not really ‘strangers’... just friends who had just met. We embody **unity**... we were one in Spirit and one in the Lord.

May we too grow in our ability to work on how our own life of faith affects our life out there. How we practice fostering healthier relationships in here **MUST** make us more effective in doing it out there. That if what we do in the church does not translate to our life in the world... of what value is it? **Knowing Christ** is great... but is incomplete unless we also **Make Christ Known**. With His Help... by the power of God through the Holy Spirit... we can truly be about **Opening Doors to Building REAL-ationships**...

CHARGE: Since some of you actually pay attention to the Scripture readings... including the particular translation... you may have noticed that I did not touch on the reading from Paul’s letter to Timothy. Which is actually a pet peeve of mine, when a passage I read that seemingly has nothing to do with the message. But the reason I didn’t speak on it earlier was to leave it with you as a Charge. In the NRSV, it is part of the section entitled the “The Secret of our Life.” And here’s what it says, in part:

“Know how one ought to behave in the household of God,

which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” (1 Tim. 3:14-15)

May we always be mindful of how we ‘ought to behave’ as the ‘household of God’... one that seeks to build genuine fellowship, and healthy ‘REAL-ationships.’ As we seek to be that ‘pillar and bulwark of the truth,’ may others come to know that the ‘Secret of our Life’ is our ‘relationships’... with one another, and most importantly, with God. As we go forth to share ‘the Secret of our Life,’ know that you do not go alone... but that the Spirit of the living God...