

September 17, 2017  
Romans 14:1-9  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB

### **“Believing Behaving Belonging”**

**Good morning! As many of you know, I have met for the last 15 years or so nearly every Tuesday morning to run with a group. What was once a group of 5 or 6 is now a group of three, as folks have taken different jobs or moved out of the area or aged out. In the course of my association with that group, I went from being an at-home-Mom to enrolling in seminary, to doing a pastoral internship, to being hired here at Creekside. Our conversations tend to be pretty wide-ranging, and it is only natural that they occasionally turn to religion. As the only pastor in the group, this usually means that I’m in the hot seat. One of the guys has a wife who is involved in church, but he is not. He acknowledges that church is good for her, but says religion is not for him. He isn’t hostile about it, but his questions keep me on my toes.**

**Our conversation this last Tuesday was about what makes the Church of the Brethren different from any other Christian denomination -- the Methodists, the Baptists, the Lutherans -- and although I try not to run and preach at the same time (most days running is all I can manage -- some days not even that), I found on further reflection that our conversation was pretty relevant to this text from Romans 14.**

**I hope you noticed that the choir sang today. Pretty awesome, right? I hope you also noticed what we sang -- there’s still time to sneak a look at your bulletin if you’ve forgotten. It’s a song recorded by the Newsboys which Angi introduced by way of a video this summer. The title is “We Believe,” and that phrase happens throughout the chorus: “We believe in God the Father, we believe in Jesus Christ . . .” etc. This is called a creedal statement: a doctrine, or formula of religious belief, as of a denomination; or an authoritative, formulated statement of the chief articles of Christian belief. There are some widely**

**circulated Christian creeds-- the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed -- maybe you memorized these if you grew up Catholic, or some other Christian tradition, but probably not in the Church of the Brethren. Why is that?**

**The answer is simple, although the history is a bit involved. The Church of the Brethren is non-creedal; although we affirm the words of the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, the things that other Christian groups subscribe to, Brethren don't write it down and make folks memorize and recite it. We don't use creeds as a test of "proper" belief, or a way to weed out heretics. At the turn of the eighteenth century, when the Brethren movement began, competing Lutheran and Catholic armies were tearing up farms and communities and forcing the inhabitants to be either Catholic or Lutheran -- this would change depending on who was winning in any given place. Academics were wrestling with questions like "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" and crafting and arguing about creeds which seemed to have very little to do with the ordinary lives of people who were being flattened by Lutheran and Catholic armies.**

**I love Paul's statement at the beginning of Romans chapter 14: Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. "Hi! It sounds like you've been having a rough time; we're glad you're here. You're wrong." Good heavens; squabbling about Christianity is as old as Christianity. The Brethren thought they could get around some of that by claiming the New Testament as our creed: the New Testament is our rule of faith and practice. But most of us need some kind of summary to help us remember what is most important.**

**What I told my fellow runner is that any balanced faith tradition has to include all of the following: Believing, Behaving, and Belonging. They can happen in any order, with different emphasis, and this is what makes different denominations -- even different congregations -- unique. The book of Romans wrestles with all these things: Paul certainly makes theological claims -- Romans is the closest thing to systematic theology which the Bible provides -- but Paul doesn't shy away from speaking about behavior or belonging. Don't welcome people just so you can criticize their beliefs: that's no way to behave. How about people who behave differently, and eat only vegetables,**

**while you eat anything: they can still belong. A central theme of Romans and all of Paul's letters is how Jews and Gentiles can belong in the church together, even though they have been shaped by different beliefs and behaviors.**

**You can see how if any one of these three--believing, behaving, belonging -- gets over-emphasized, the church starts to roll off-kilter: if anyone belongs, whether or not you believe in Jesus Christ, then we're not the church, even if we are a bunch of nice folks. If we can behave however we want, as long as we say the magic words and give lip service to the right things, we're not disciples of Jesus, we're hypocrites. If you believe the right things and behave the right way, but you're still not accepted because you aren't related to the right people, or your last name isn't Yoder or Miller (although we love our Yoders and Millers) -- we have not modeled the welcome and the hospitality of Christ. Denominations and even congregations may accent these differently, but we have to have a balance of believing, behaving, and belonging.**

**There's another framework for considering believing, behaving, belonging: I'm not trying to put everything into the same box, but it turns out that there may be some ways to think about this which are already familiar to us. [Slide of color continuum] How many of you were at our Mission and Resource meetings at the end of August? We introduced this there, and have shared it with some ministry teams since then. This an abbreviated version of Creekside's mission statement, which is Seek, Celebrate, Share, and our vision statement which is Rooted in God, Growing in Jesus, Bearing Fruit in the Spirit - some of the words which describe our vision are listed too. We invited team leaders and members to think about this in terms of Seek: is our relationship with God ; Celebrate: is our relationship with folks at Creekside; and Share: is our relationship with people outside these walls in our neighborhood and nation and world. Are you with me?**

**I think we can also think of these groupings as Believing, Behaving and Belonging:**

**Believing is our relationship with God, Behaving is how we interact with folks at Creekside, and Belonging is what we offer to people**

outside of our walls. Notice there aren't clear divisions between these, it's a continuum, and this end isn't better than that end. In order to realize the full spectrum of life with God and each other, we need all of these colors: the church should be encouraging belief in the foundations of our faith: God the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit -- through Bible study and prayer: that's down in the red zone. Because we believe, we worship. We gather together for worship, we encourage one another, we take care of one another, we have meetings to coordinate ministries. This is greenish and blueish. And because we want other people to belong to a community of faith, and because of the example of Jesus, we share. We contribute to the needs of the saints, we give tomatoes to Church Community Services and school kits to Mennonite Central Committee and water bottles to cross country runners. This is the purple end. We'll be looking at this continuum again in a couple weeks: we want to acknowledge our teams and celebrate their work. We also want to ask: how are we doing? What's working really well? What wishes do we have for the future? How can we get there?

If this feels like a lot to take in, fear not. It turns out that Paul has kind of a shorthand to evaluate how we're doing. It isn't a church program; it's more of a practice. A practice which takes practice. Here's what Paul writes in verse 8, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." There it is! That's the crux of what the church is called to be: we believe that we are the Lord's, we behave like we are the Lord's, and we belong because we belong to the Lord. Every day is an opportunity to re-affirm that we live for the Lord, and to pick ourselves up and try again if yesterday wasn't our best effort.

This morning during the final hymn I will be offering the sacrament of anointing. If you'd like to come forward to have your forehead anointed with oil and have prayer from this family of faith, you are welcome. Whether or not you choose to be anointed, please pay attention to the words of the anointing hymn: it is God speaking in the first person, addressing us directly, and the words are, "I love you, and you are mine." Whether we live, whether we die, whatever we believe, however we behave, we are God's. After everyone is anointed, I will invite anyone who wishes to come forward and lay

**hands on these brothers and sisters for prayer. You belong in this community; more importantly, you belong to God. Amen.**