

We Belong to the LORD

✦ **Living in love** (vv.5-6)

✦ **Dying in peace** (vv.7-9)

In the name of Jesus, Lord of both the living and the dead, dearly redeemed family of God:

One thing that has always been a hallmark of God's people is their desire for all people of all cultures to join in praising our great God and Savior. Although the Jews of Jesus' day had forgotten this, Paul quotes in the next chapter from several Old Testament prophets inspired by the Holy Spirit:

...so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name." Again, it says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples." And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (15:9-13 NIV84)

The important thing to God and His people is not where you're from, the color of your skin or the clothes you wear. As one hymn writer put it: "All depends on our possessing God's abundant grace and blessing." In God's view all that counts is that **We Belong to the LORD**. His Word keeps us...

✦ **Living in love** (vv.5-6)

Some may think we're talking about "multiculturalism" here. But that word took on political baggage in the 1990's. We needed a better term: *Cross-cultural* puts the focus on the cross of Jesus Christ which unites all people of all races and cultures, times and climes. One of my favorite examples comes close to home. A former U of M football player named Steve Cambrice is married to one of our Lutheran Day School teachers at Pilgrim in Minneapolis. Steve is African-American and looks like a football player. When I introduced him at a New Life Bible Study, I said, "He ain't heavy. He's my brother. But if it comes to carrying, he'll have to carry me." At a Minnesota District Convention, Steve looked out from the podium on a sea of white faces. He paused, caught full attention and brought down the house when he said with all seriousness, "Now I know what it means to be a brother in the hood."

What I love about brothers like Steve is how clearly they understand acceptance is a two-way street. We don't realize how hard it may be for others to accept us. Consciences can be tender about a new member's former life. If you blurt out, "Pastor will have something to say about that," how is that loving your brother or your Pastor? We all need God's kindness and patience to teach us wisdom. **Living in love**, Paul says it this way, "**Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.**" (15:7) **We Belong to the LORD**. He wants us all to be **Living in love**.

Christians in Rome were of Jewish and Gentile descent. That's why sacred days and dietary laws troubled some members. This can still happen. One Lino Lakes inmate explained kosher killing in a meat packing plant where he once worked. I'll spare you the details, but you can see why the Lord's Apostle is shifting the focus from grub to grace, helping us cross cultures: "**One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.**" **Living in love** to God and your neighbor shows itself in constant thanks to God. Eating or not, observing or not, we always want to be giving thanks to God. Otherwise, without thankfulness, we're like the Dead Sea. It has no outlet. Bodies can float, but nothing can live.

Music and liturgy are another case in point. God does not say how we must worship. As long as the focus is on Christ – law and gospel, sin and grace, as long as Word and sacrament are central, there is no New Testament law. But **Living in love**, we want the most out of our precious hours of worship. One mom explained how helpful the repetition of liturgy was for her kids. Holding my son Joel at age two, I noticed the people behind him smiling. I asked if he was making faces. “No,” they replied, “he’s singing the liturgy right along with you.” Many churches experiment with contemporary music. But they find that styles change. Sometimes music can get in the way of Christ’s message. The best church music raises all worshipers above the mundane and sends our spirits soaring in God’s grace and wisdom.

One of my favorite examples is of a musician who in his younger days was like a rock star. As a child he could sit at the keyboard and improvise beautiful music. By his twenties, he was the best paid composer on earth. But fame and fortune passed. The pundits said his days were over. His music company went bankrupt because no one seemed to want to hear him anymore. “Yet his troubles also matured him, softening his sharp tongue. His temper mellowed, and his music became more heartfelt.” He learned what it means to be **Living in love**. Then one morning he received a package from an associate. A collection of Bible texts drew together the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. On August 22, 1741, he locked himself in his London home for twenty-three days, composing music for the words. Huge crowds, including King George II, came to listen. He was the one who jumped to his feet just as everyone now rises when we reach the *Hallelujah Chorus* in George Fredric Handel’s *Messiah*. * Where else can you find music so clear to the Biblical text that sets your spirit soaring? He kept **Living in love**.

‡ **Dying in peace (vv.7-9)**

“For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.” To walk in the way of understanding, know first that **We Belong to the LORD**. First, He created us. Then He redeemed us with His blood poured out on the cross. Now He sanctifies us by Word and sacrament so that more and more we know His love for us, preparing for that moment of **Dying in peace**.

It’s not something most folks want to talk about. And yet our loving Lord spends a lifetime preparing us for two things: taking His Holy Supper and getting ready to meet Him face to face. One army chaplain wrote about the GI’s he led to Christ during the campaign on Italy in World War II. One soldier showed him a letter from his folks who were praying for him to come to faith. Another letter from his wife showed their newborn son while she begged that the boy’s father would come to Christ. He asked the Chaplain, “How can I refuse when all the people I care most about in the world are pleading with me?” He confessed his faith and was baptized. Two weeks later a bomb blast killed him and his platoon. The Chaplain pleaded with folks back home to pray hard for their loved ones. “Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day.” (CW 588:2) Nothing else matters in the end but **Dying in peace** to be with God.

Over a hundred years after G.F. Handel, another musician was headed home from Christmas holidays with his wife and kids visiting his mother in Pennsylvania. In 1876, most travel was by train. It was December 29, 1876, all were on board the Pacific Express in Buffalo returning to Chicago. Along about this time of the evening in a blinding snowstorm the train crossed a ravine. No one would have heard the wooden trestle collapse. But all the cars, packed with holiday passengers, plunged seventy-feet into the icy river and caught fire. 100+ people perished, among them—Philip Bliss and his family. He was 38. Friends found his last hymn in the baggage that reached Chicago on another train. *

We will sing Philip Bliss’ melody today in our Hymn of Thanksgiving after Lord’s Supper. For Christ has given us God’s grace for **Dying in peace**. So while we’re **Living in love** we can be confident that in life and in death **We Belong to the LORD**. In Christ alone we can sing with holy joy, “It Is Well With My Soul. It Is Well.” (CWS 760) Amen.

* (Robert Morgan, *On This Day*)