

Water from an Ancient Well: Community
Romans 15:5-7
Sunday, July 19, 2026

*"Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."
Romans 15:7*

You are likely aware that the Men's Soccer World Cup is happening here in North America, and recently Brazil, the five-time champion, lost to Norway, which was in the World Cup for the first time. It was a shocking loss because Brazil was ranked #4 and Norway #9. I also read a shocking excuse circulating in Brazil for why they lost: that the Brazilian team lost because of the rise of Evangelical Protestantism in Brazil. The theory is that Protestantism, imported into Brazil primarily from countries like the United States, focuses too much on individual performance, while the traditional Catholic culture of Brazil focuses on the community winning together. Many of the players on Brazil's team are evangelical Protestants, thus they are selfish people who only focus on their own glory, and not the glory of the Brazilian team.

While going as far as to say that a country's religious preference would lead to World Cup victory or defeat is a stretch too far, I think there is some truth in the critique that Protestantism and the culture it has produced, especially in America, leans towards an individualism that can be unhealthy. That individualism is at the heart of a broader problem: we are becoming less able to form and sustain true community. One aspect of this that has not gone unnoticed by social scientists and commentators is the current state of friendships in the

United States, which sociologists have termed a "friendship recession." Studies cited by the Harvard Leadership and Happiness Laboratory show that the number of Americans who say they have no close friends has quadrupled from 3 to 12 percent since 1990. While 12 percent is not a large number, the number of people with large friend groups has declined as well, and reports show that the average amount of time adults spend with friends has declined by 33% in the last ten years.

The Harvard article notes that these trends risk becoming solidified in our culture as people devote more and more of their time to their work, their nuclear family, and online social interactions. The increase in participation in these three areas can lead us to believe we have deep social relationships, yet research shows that social contact in these areas tends to be shallower than the sustained personal friendships Americans once enjoyed, creating a false sense of true friendship and connection. The Harvard article says that social participation in organizations and spaces outside the home, including institutions such as churches, has also decreased due to this cultural shift. This study (and others) conclude that we are worse off for this trend, leading to increased mental and physical health issues. Increasing isolation also lowers societal trust and increases political division, further weakening community.

This current sermon series has been walking through principles of Celtic Christianity, the spiritual heritage of the people of the British Isles, as outlined in the book, "Water From an Ancient Well" by Kenneth McIntosh. In the book, McIntosh points out that the Celts of Britain,

like many ancient societies, were much more socially connected than we are today. The bonds of tribe and kin were vitally important to survival, so hospitality and community were highly prized virtues.

Thus when the Celts heard the gospel, Christian hospitality and community easily took root. Theologically, the Celts understood the Divine community that exists in the Holy Trinity, where Father, Son, and Spirit live in a perfect loving community. Passages like Acts 2, which teach about the Christian community of gathering and sharing resources, would have made perfect sense to the ancient Celt. As monastic centers flourished across England, they always kept rooms open for guests who may be traveling and need shelter, seeking to "welcome one another" as Paul teaches in Romans 15:7.

Unfortunately, as previously noted, our culture conspires against us in many ways when it comes to welcoming each other as Christ has welcomed us. More unfortunate is that the church has often been part of the problem. Churches too often fail to live up to the ideal of being truly welcoming places. Some of you may have experienced this in your life. I know that I have!

I don't believe that most churches intend to become unwelcoming places. It's that the typical human drive to belong with people who are similar to us gets magnified in church spaces because everyone knows this isn't how churches are supposed to be. We all know that the Scripture teaches us to love and welcome all people, yet we easily forget that the church is not

supposed to be an exclusive club where we worry about who is in and who is out; it's supposed to be more like a hospital, where people find healing through the work of God's Spirit in and through God's people in loving relationship with each other.

Both out in the world and within the church, I believe we far too easily fall into the trap of wanting only to be with people like us. We may mistakenly believe that the only way to have deep relationships is with people like us. We strive for commonality before diversity. Yet, at least in my experience, and I would guess in many of your lives, deep relationships with people who are greatly different from you can be extremely rewarding.

I think of all the friends I have had who have taught me so much about being a good human and a good Christian and who differ from me in so many amazing ways! Their presence and witness in my life have enriched it so much. Many of them feel to me much more like family than friends. So many of them took a risk by setting aside their judgments of me so we could be friends.

I think especially of some of my friends who do not believe in God as I do. Some of them had been deeply hurt by Christians and the Church. I became close enough to several of them that I heard these stories of deep personal hurt. It was difficult for me to hear those stories. I kept wanting to make a defense of God, the Bible and the Church. While I never backed off of what I believed, the Spirit most often told me just to be quiet and listen. I hoped to embody the quote from author Simon Weil that says "attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."

I don't think I ever changed their minds, but I pray that maybe, just maybe I helped God change their hearts. When I was about to move here to Salado, one in particular gave me the biggest goodbye hug I think I've ever received and told me he loved me. Such a rare and beautiful gift from someone I was initially scared to talk to.

As we live out our faith in our church and community, may we all lean into just how much we need each other. May we model the loving acceptance and welcoming Spirit of Christ, who loved us first, while we were still lost without him. So take a risk: talk to people you may not normally engage with. Reach out in love and welcome all into the love and presence of Christ in our midst. Notice the people around you and step outside your comfort zone. Work up the courage to actually talk to the people you encounter every day. You never know where that love may lead or what doors may be opened. Amen.