Beloved brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ, guests, we’re two months, now, into the home visit season. Do you recall what our theme is? It draws on 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” Our theme is: paraclesis. Boys and girls, do you remember what that word means? It means a number of things, all at the same time. It can mean “comfort”, it can mean “encourage”, it can mean “admonish”. One might catch all three of them with “to speak an appropriate word”. “Paraclesis” are the words that give expression to how we as brothers and sisters relate to one another in the faith.

This morning we look at this paraclesis as Scripture speaks of it in Romans 15:4-6. The word “paraclesis” is found twice in this text, most English Bible versions translate it here with “encouragement”. In Romans 14 and 15 Paul writes about how brothers and sisters who stand differently in the faith are to relate to one another. There are the weak in the faith and the strong in the faith. Paul urges these two types of believers not to take each other to task, but to live in such a way that they do not become a hindrance to others. There’s a dual purpose to this. First of all, it will lead to unity within the church of God, a good experience of the life of faith. Secondly, it will provide a united front to those who are outside, be it with a view to defending the faith or with a view to inviting outsiders into the family of God. And of course, ultimately it serves the glory of God.

We listen to God’s Word this morning with this theme: Endurance and encouragement lead through harmony to God’s glory. We’ll pay attention to (1) our task; (2) our need; and (3) our purpose.

1) First, our task. That’s Romans 15:4.

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Boys and girls, this verse talks about the reason why we have the Bible. As such it’s a good text to go with the school theme of John Calvin this year. A good text to memorize and keep in mind. God had lots of things written down for us. And those things that were written down, were written down to teach us. That tells us what our task is, right? If the Bible was written to teach us, then our task is to learn what is written down. Learn, and memorization is a good way to start learning it. We need to open our Bibles and learn what’s there. It should be the song of our hearts: the B-I-B-L-E, yes, that’s the Book for me!

Why? Because in the pages of Scripture we find the teachings of endurance and encouragement. Endurance, one might also translate the term here with “patience”. Bible scholars take the best of both worlds and speak of “patient endurance”. Scripture instructs us on how we can keep going in our lives of faith, in spite of struggles, set-backs, frustrations, misunderstandings, disputes, arguments, fall-outs, persecutions, temptations. A very good example of this is the book of Job. How does one keep trusting God when God himself has turned against you? In Hebrews 11 we find a long list of people who lived by faith and did not give up. Each account is a testimony to the power of God, that amazing work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of people.

Scripture encourages us to stick with it. Encourages, there’s that word “paraclesis” again. The encouragement of the Scriptures is at the same time the comfort of the Scriptures or the admonition of the Scriptures. The Bible always has an appropriate word for us, written for the situation we find ourselves in. Remember the sermon three weeks ago, on the sword of the Spirit? The Bible is like a
dagger, a very precise instrument that finds its way to its mark and does what needs doing. It will comfort those who mourn, it will embolden those who feel timid, it will call to order those who tend to stray.

This teaching of the Writings is to give us hope. We do not have yet where we are going. We are not yet without sin, living in perfect communion with God and one another. But we long for that, we strive for that, we are certain we’ll get there. that longing, that striving, that certainty, that’s what “hope” is in the Bible. We’ll get there, for we read in the Bible of how many others “got there”.

And one thing we learn from the Bible is that we receive each other as fellow-believers to help us along the way.

2) That brings us to our second point: our need.

Romans 15:5 is a petition to God, a prayer. It’s a request put to God. Hence I’ve chosen for the word “need”. For boys and girls, when we pray to God, we ask God for the things we need. What do we need? What do we need to receive from God, who authored the Scriptures and is thus the source of the endurance and encouragement we find in its pages? What do we need?

In our text we read “a spirit of unity among yourselves”. The same expression is found in Romans 12:16, there it is translated with “live in harmony with one another.” Philippians 2:2 has this phrase as well, “be like-minded”. Paul is asking for harmony, unity, like-mindedness. It’s a surprising prayer, for Paul has just been explaining how people are very different when it comes to the faith, there are the strong in the faith and the weak in the faith. There are different opinions. And now Paul prays the Lord for like-mindedness among the church members. Don’t the two clash?

No, they don’t. For Paul is here not referring to the substance of our thinking. As in “we all need to think the same about a certain matter.” Paul is pointing to the attitude of our thinking. I think that’s why the NIV has here chosen to insert the word “spirit” into the text. “May God give you a spirit of unity among yourselves.” The differences that exist between fellow-believers on account of how they stand in relation to the faith, to what the Bible teaches, should not become wedges that lead to disintegration. Rather, fellow-believers will draw together. Again I think of a phrase from Philippians 2:(3-4): “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Paul prays for this harmonious approach to sharing in the faith “as you follow Christ Jesus.” That’s a bit of a free translation, but it does catch Paul’s intent well. Philippians 2 makes the same move: the Philippians are pointed to what they have in Christ and the example which Christ has set for them. Have the same attitude as Christ, Paul writes in Philippians 2, and then he relates the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. In Romans 15 it is referred to with just a brief line, but it works the same way. The harmony we ask God to give us, is in accordance with the will of Christ—He prayed for the unity of the church—and in keeping with how Christ himself lived—he sought to exclude no one, not even Samaritans, Gentiles, tax-collectors, prostitutes, freedom fighters, fishermen, the list goes on and on.

Our need: to be given harmony by God, a harmony that accords with the will and life of our Saviour.

3) And to what end? We consider, in the third place, our purpose.

“So that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “One heart and mouth” is a key expression here. The “one heart” part translates a phrase that means
something like “in togetherness of zeal”, “with the same passion”. It points to the fact that what we learn from Scripture will give us, under the blessing of God, a harmonious spirit in the church, in spite of all our differences, so that with the same love and exuberance and passion we will act, we will praise God. “One voice”. What lives in the heart will spill out of the mouth. With our voices, boys and girls, we express what we feel inside of us. If we’re happy, if we’re joyful, if we’re eager to serve the Lord our God, then we’ll sing and shout aloud, to the praise of God our King.

“That you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Glorify. What is the chief end and purpose of man? It is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Everything, also our faith lives, are ultimately focused on the glory of God’s Name. Our faith life is not an end itself. Ultimately it’s not about me feeling good about my convictions, my way of life. Ultimately it’s about being conformed to the image of Christ Jesus to the glory of God.

**Endurance and encouragement lead through harmony to God’s glory.** Paraclesis, mutual comfort, admonition, and encouragement. An appropriate word spoken at the right time. For that we draw on Scripture, on the Bible. God had it written that we might patiently endure and be encouraged unto hope. And as we gather around God’s Word, during worship services, as families, in our Bible studies, we seek harmony. Different convictions exist, because we all are different people with different measures of faith (Romans 12:3). But we will be united in our zeal, in our passion for God so that we may glorify him.

Harmony, togetherness is one of the things symbolized in the Lord’s Supper. We eat and drink in one celebration, we eat and drink in unison. For we believe, together. We share in Christ, together. We together, form that body of Christ which is to be united in heart and voice to the praise of God’s glory. And thus, we will be ready to paraclete one another. And also those outside will say, “Truly the Spirit of God is in your midst.”

Amen.