One of the greatest challenges of the early church was negotiating the sometimes difficult relationship that existed between Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians. Throughout the New Testament epistles, there are accounts where Paul sought to outline the essential practices of faith in Christ over against what he considered unnecessary efforts of maintaining Jewish law.

Paul shares that God had preserved a remnant of Jews, even as Gentiles were also “grafted” by God into the life of faith. The creation of this new, blended family created “growing pains” as they each learned of the other’s centrally held beliefs, practices, and views. Paul, speaking to the Gentiles, as a Jew, cautioned them to be kind and gracious, just as God had so tenderly dealt with them by including them in this new faith, found in and through Jesus Christ.

I find it fascinating that some 2000 years since the Book of Romans was written, we still have occasions where the church struggles with being open, hospitable, and welcoming to others. There are still issues of spiritual superiority. There are those who would claim that legacy and heritage give them special status in the life of the congregation. There are those who are new, who believe that they have a greater awareness of the things of God because of all that they have seen and witnessed in other places they have been in their life.

As a former district superintendent, it was very telling to see how many churches share with me that they were a “friendly church.” I learned that they were friendly churches – TO EACH OTHER! On occasion, I would send people to visit some of my churches as a kind of “Secret Shopper.” These people would attend on a Sunday and report back on how hospitable the congregation was while they were at the church. Several people shared with me that they sat in the sanctuary and not one person spoke to them the entire time they were there! One person went so far as to say they were in a pew and a woman reached over their pew to shake hands with her friend 2 pews back, while completely ignoring them during the greeting time!

There was really no “pattern” around the size of the church and the friendliness of a congregation. Some small churches were praised for their efforts, some were chided. Some large churches had excellent ways of making a person feel connected, while others were described as cold and aloof. But it is a reminder that at all times, and in all places, we should earnestly work to ensure that those who are gathering with the worshiping community need to feel welcomed, included, and loved.

God deals with us individually throughout life. Paul records that God dealt sternly with the Israelites, while dealing kindly with the Gentiles. But it is a cautionary word, because Paul is reminding the Gentiles of their own need to deal gently with the Israelites. And, it is a strong reminder that all of us should be gracious and kind, regardless of whether we have a long, storied, and established faith or whether we are new, eager, and learning in Christ. All of us belong to God.

There is a great new hymn of the church that I have had the privilege to join with others in singing in denominational gatherings called “For Everyone Born.” I am including the lyrics in the close of this reflection to help us to remember the command to welcome all, just as we have been welcomed.
My prayer is that throughout the Alabama-West Florida Conference we can open our doors and let the Spirit move through our existing places of worship in the hopes that new life will be grafted into our communities of faith and together we can experience a deeper, richer relationship with God.

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead,

CHORUS
    and God will delight when we are creators
    of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
    yes, God will delight when we are creators
    of justice, justice and joy!

For woman and man, a place at the table,
revising the roles, deciding the share,
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,
for woman and man, a system that's fair, (CHORUS)

For young and for old, a place at the table,
a voice to be heard, a part in the song,
the hands of a child in hands that are wrinkled,
for young and for old, the right to belong, (CHORUS)

For just and unjust, a place at the table,
abuser, abused, with need to forgive,
in anger, in hurt, a mindset of mercy,
for just and unjust, a new way to live, (CHORUS)

For everyone born, a place at the table,
to live without fear, and simply to be,
to work, to speak out, to witness and worship,
for everyone born, the right to be free, (CHORUS)