

In Pursuit of Unity – Romans 14:1-12 – September 17, 2017

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Religious communities are similar to other social organizations in one specific way – disagreement among its members. We quarrel over opinions. We split hairs over the most basic of things. We make mountains over molehills. It is one thing to seek consensus when discussing orthodoxy – those things that we affirm as the basic tenets of what we believe. It is quite another thing to argue over the nonessentials like the matters of how we live out our faith in our everyday life.

The Apostle Paul saw this animosity among Christians in his ministry. He talked about it in his letter to the Church at Corinth, and he also addressed it in his letter to the church at Rome. Apparently in the Roman church there were some disagreements regarding the type of food folks could eat and the way that certain days were to be observed.

Paul illustrates these differing strains of thought using the descriptors, those who are weak in faith and those who are strong in faith. Paul never takes a particular side here. He never states that one group is right and the other is wrong, he merely points out what each affirms and goes from there. The weak group seems to be narrower in its understanding of living the life of faith. They refuse to eat any meat, feeling that to do so would compromise their faith. The strong group felt no such need for restriction. All food was acceptable for consumption. The weak group also felt that certain days were to be set aside as exceptionally holy and were to be observed as such. The strong group saw that all days were equal and should be treated with equal respect.

The differences had to do with how the groups expressed their religiosity. The weak group needed to follow specific restrictions in order to express their faith. The strong group felt a greater amount of freedom in how they expressed themselves faithfully. Again, Paul did not take sides, and never alluded that one group was better than other, except perhaps in his choice of words “weak and strong”. His point was not to uplift the merits of one group over the other. He remained tolerant of their different expressions of faithfulness.

What is at stake here to Paul was how these differences were affecting the life of the community in the church at Rome. One group tended to see their world with sharp distinctions. The other group saw the life of faith in shades of gray. One group preferred rigid guidelines to follow, the other preferred flexibility and openness as their guide. Narrow road versus wide-open spaces. Strict obedience versus freedom of conscience. Those differences led to in-fighting.

Paul warned the groups not to pass judgment on each other. He exhorted them to respect the convictions of the other group. They should be tolerant of the beliefs of one another and not condemn one another for seeing things in a different light. The eyes of faith envision things in

diverse ways. Paul does not attempt to harmonize them or expect the groups to conform to one another. This may seem somewhat surprising. Isn't one group right and the other wrong? Or doesn't Paul at least have an opinion about who has a better grasp of the truth? No. Paul's goal here is not to show that one group is somehow better than the other.

Instead he cautions us away from making judgements on others. No matter how weak or strong, anyone who follows Christ is a member of God's household. Only God is able to judge, and it is not the place for another Christian to criticize or condemn. If God is willing, and we know God is, to accept each and every person through God's incredible grace, whether that person is, as Paul describes, weak or strong, then who are we to make a judgment on any person.

The issues that divide Christians today include, but are not limited to, abortion, sexuality, interpretation of scripture, gender equality, evolution and creationism, social justice and advocacy, and universalism. People on both sides of these issues may hold strong convictions about what is right and wrong. The debates on these issues can be quite fierce and passionate, as each side believes they are right and other is not.

Paul is not saying that we should avoid debating the issues that divide us. What Paul is concerned with here is how we view and treat one another on opposing sides. Sometimes people can become so passionate about the side they hold, it begins to color how they see the people who hold the opposing view. When the debate leads to animosity and hatred of the other side, then it's gone too far.

The key to understanding this whole passage is found in verses 7 and 8. Paul writes, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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." This is the guiding principle for the life of a Christian. We belong to God. We are not our own. Christ is our guide, our master, our savior. The entirety of our life, from birth to death, all falls in the realm of the dominion of Christ. And this is a reminder too of our place in the overarching community of faith. We are all part of the body of Christ. So, if we're all united in faith, then there is no room for condemnation or judgment against each other.

Instead of disparaging our differences, we are to celebrate our diversity. There are various ways in which our brothers and sisters may choose to honor and follow God, and they may differ from our own, but we have no right to judge how that honoring of God takes shape. We may have our own preferences, but that does not give us license to assume our beliefs are more worthy or more acceptable to God.

We can look at Paul's examples and wonder why people ever disagreed about whether eating meat or not was an acceptable way to honor God. But this was a major point of contention in the early church. There were issues that some meat had been used in pagan rituals. Then there were also some religious groups, like the Essenes, who had some pretty strict dietary regulations. And these prohibitions found their way into the Christian Church. We may also not understand the arguments concerning the setting aside of special days during which specific rules and regulations were followed. You could not do such and such or you'd be breaking the Sabbath or violating the Holy Day. Some were pretty strict about what you could and could not do on the certain days. Those examples may not make much sense to us today.

Over 50 years ago, Presbyterians argued whether it was okay to ordain women, and that caused division in the denomination. I wonder if 50 or 100 years from now, future Presbyterians will look back at us and wonder why we ever argued about that things that currently divide us. It is over these types of things that churches begin to fight and sometimes splits occur. Each side believes it has a monopoly on the truth. Paul preached otherwise.

The exciting thing about our Presbyterian tradition, is our motto, "Always reformed, always being reformed." As the Holy Spirit moves in our churches and opens our eyes to a deeper, more fuller understanding of the truth, our perspective begins to change. Through Scripture and the Confessions of our tradition, the Holy Spirit speaks to us and offers new insight. We gain a greater understanding of what it means to be faithful Christians and learn new and more appropriate ways to honor God. Through the community of faith, we learn and grow from the perspectives of one another.

Remember, in the passage immediately preceding this one, the one we talked about last week, Paul talks about the Law of Love and how we are required to love our neighbors as ourselves. Love doesn't mean having a warm feeling toward them, but actually seeking to promote their good and well-being. So here in this passage Paul is bringing that message back into the church. That if we love our Christian neighbor, there is no room for judgment or condemnation.

And that is Paul's whole point here. We Christians are diverse and wonderful creatures of God. We all are at different places in our journeys of faith, we all hold certain convictions about what we think is right and wrong in our faith practices. And many of us hold those convictions strongly. There are certainly places and times for dialogue and for the sharing of ideas in order to promote growth in one's faith. But in our general daily lives of faith, we are called to live in an attitude of love and respect for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We may not always understand why a person does or does not do a certain thing, or why a person holds a particular belief, but it is not our place to ridicule, judge or condemn. In fact, I'd guess that love and respect for one who is different than us may actually plant the seed for future dialogue and growth.

