

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Romans 14:1-12 (NRSV)

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. [2] Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. [3] Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. [4] Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

[5] Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. [6] Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

[7] We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. [8] 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. [9] For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

[10] Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. [11] For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God."

[12] So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

[22] Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

[23] "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. [24] When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; [25] and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. [26] So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' [27] And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

[28] But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' [29] Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' [30] But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. [31] When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. [32] Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

[33] Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' [34] And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. [35] So my heavenly Father will also do to

every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

DOING SOMETHING WITH THE MATERIAL WE'VE BEEN GIVEN

I'm a big fan of satire, and one of my favorite TV shows is a satirical cartoon, "The Simpsons." I'm especially interested in how they portray the town's minister, the Rev. Lovejoy. Though he's just a cartoon character with yellow skin, I can identify with some of his struggles.

For example, in one episode a new, more exciting rock and roll church comes to town. Many of Lovejoy's flock leave to attend the exciting new service and the poor minister preaches to a small group of people that look quite bored with his sermon on "God smiting the Amalakites" or some such passage.

Finally, in frustration the pastor turns toward his tiny snoozing congregation and says, "Come on folks. I'm doing the best I can with the material I've been given!"

I can identify with his frustration ... not that any of you ever look bored mind you, but sometimes I find it hard to do something with the material that I've been given. I'm committed to preaching all of God's Word and not just my favorite passages. That's why I generally follow the lectionary.

But, sometimes I read a passage from the Bible and just scratch my head.

What in the world does this mean for men and women who are seeking to be faithful in the modern world?

Our lesson for today fits in that "head scratching" category.

MEAT AND VEGATABLES

The passage is about a problem that is not a problem in the modern world. But, at one time, this was apparently a problem of great significance. It is mentioned not only in Paul's letter to the Romans, but also in his letter to the Corinthians. It was also one of the problems discussed at the church's first general meeting of the church in Jerusalem.

What was this great theological problem of the early church? They were asking the burning question "Is it okay to serve meat with your vegetables?"

Now mind you this was before the advent of those who eat vegetables only for health reasons. This controversy had to do with eating food that was kosher or allowed under the Old Testament law.

In the ancient world, the meat sold in the marketplace was sometimes offered to some deity. And the meat was almost never prepared in accordance to Jewish law. So, there were some in the church who worried a great deal about this. Their Jewish upbringing made them ask,

"How can we be faithful people if our meat is not kosher?"

So what do I do with a passage like this?

I recall visiting a fellow minister. He had a frustrated look on his face as he read a commentary. I asked him what was wrong and he said, "I'm trying to beat a sermon out of this crazy passage."

Maybe it would be smart when we run into a passage like this to just choose another passage. After all, how many of you when you go to Publix worry if the meat was offered to an idol before it arrived at the meat counter? None of you worry about that.

The question of whether is permissible to eat meat offered to idols will not be on the docket when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church meets in Birmingham next summer. We will be debating issues about peace and justice and theological issues of weight and substance. We hope that the debates will be about issues of substance.

But, I wonder. If someone would read the minutes of our meetings 2,000 years from now, might they find our arguments to be as esoteric and irrelevant as the discussion long ago about whether it was permissible to eat meat with your vegetables? I think that it is entirely possible!

CONFLICT MANAGMENT

But, upon closer examination our passage for today may not be as irrelevant as we first thought. It's not really about a specific issue. It's not really about whether our meat should be kosher. It's a blueprint for dealing with controversy in the church. And that is a very relevant topic.

What happens when Christian people of good will disagree about particular issues?

I'll tell you what we often do. We often make our own convictions the measure of the convictions of others. We say, "Of course this is the right way. It's what I believe. The Bible says thus and so on this issue," and then we pull out proof texts for our particular viewpoint.

Those Jewish Christians who long ago said that only kosher meat should be eaten had passages from the Bible that they could quote as proof texts. Take a look at Leviticus 11, and you'll see that many of the things we eat are indeed forbidden according to the Jewish law.

Now you might rightly say that as Christians we take a different view of the Old Testament. We look at it from the standpoint of the gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ. It makes us interpret these passages differently.

There is more freedom for those who have been saved by God's grace in Christ Jesus. The Christian life is about living for Christ instead of just eating the right foods.

Indeed, the Apostle Paul seemed to agree with that viewpoint. Paul referred to Christians who believed that they had the freedom to eat anything as "strong." And those who had scruples about their diet were described as "weak."

COMMUNITY OVER SCRUPLES

But, in the final analysis Paul did not take the side of the "strong" or the "weak."

Paul analyzed the problem in a different way.

According to Paul, the most important thing was not who was right and who was wrong. The most important thing was how this controversy was compromising the integrity of the Christian community. People were putting their opponents in the worst possible light. They were letting this one issue (that we now see as irrelevant) to color all of their interactions.

They were judging their fellow Christians, and according to Paul, they just didn't have the right to do that. Only God could judge.

Instead, they were encouraged to live in harmony with one another and they were encouraged to live with a certain amount of ambiguity. They were encouraged to respect the convictions of the other group.

Now don't misunderstand. It didn't mean that they had to agree with something that they didn't really believe. It just meant that they needed to respect them enough to lay off the judgment.

PEACE, UNITY AND PURITY

Some of you may know that a blue ribbon committee has been meeting on behalf of the Presbyterian Church these past two years. They are prominent conservative and liberal theologians who were charged to further the peace, purity and unity of the church by working together on some of the thorniest issues in the church today.

At first I thought it was a colossal mistake. I thought it would be like one of those talk shows where people with extreme positions yell at each other for an hour before calling it quits.

But, by the grace of God this very diverse committee was able to struggle together about some very divisive issues and bring us a report that offers hope and advice that sounds a lot like what Paul wrote to the Romans long ago.

They said that those things which unite us in Christ Jesus are a lot stronger than those things that divide us. And they said that we need to lay off the judgment. Instead of forming so many advocacy groups, they said that we need to form what they called discernment groups, groups of diverse people that meet for worship, community building, study and theological reflection.

I must admit that my view of the church has changed over the years. When I was younger I wanted to be in the company of those whose views were just like mine.

But, now I find myself seeking just the opposite. I find myself longing for a discernment group instead of a fellowship group. I find myself longing for a group of people who are willing to disagree with me and worship with me at the same time. I find myself longing for a group of people who are mature enough in the faith to live with a bit of uncertainty.

It seems to me that this is where I find the Spirit of God at work.

A DIVIDED CHURCH

And, yet it also seems to me that it is becoming harder and harder to find a group that allows such freedom, especially in the church. We are becoming increasingly polarized.

The country has been divided into "red" states and "blue" states, and, in the same way, the church has been divided into camps based upon their view of ordination and sexuality. I've heard folks on both sides say that we need to move on to some other issue, that there might be some other issue that God wants us to address.

But, like the issue of kosher meat in the early church, the problem just keeps coming up. Maybe there is a larger theological issue behind the issue of ordination that we need to contemplate.

We think that the issue of kosher meat is largely irrelevant today. But, there was an important theological point behind this problem. People needed to know if it was necessary for converts to Christ to become Jews first. Was Christianity a form of the Jewish faith or was it something entirely new?

It was through this controversy about meat and vegetables that the church finally came to understand that God had done something entirely new in Jesus. They were no longer bound by the old law. Instead, they had been freed to live by the power of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

I have a friend from seminary days who led his church out of our denomination. I heard him preach several weeks ago while I was on vacation, and he predicted that in fifty years those of us in the mainline denominations will not only be on the sideline we will be out of business all together. All our wrangling over sexuality and ordination will eventually lead to the demise of denominations as we know them.

I guess that's possible. I have been a minister in the Presbyterian Church for twenty-three years, and this thorny question about sexuality and ordination has been dogging me every one of those years.

My very first Sunday in my very first church, right before I preached, a young lady came up to me and began to vehemently denounce what she perceived to be the Presbyterian Church's idolatrous views on this subject.

Needless to say, my mind was not on this topic before my first sermon at my first church. I was just trying to survive that first attempt at

preaching. But, I did remember thinking "Is the ministry going to be like this? Will my whole career be spent dealing with problems that are beyond my control?"

I guess it's good that I didn't know the answer to that question because I might not be standing here today! I am amazed that now toward the end of my ministry we are having the same disagreements in the church that we had twenty-three years ago! The names have changed, but the arguments are still the same.

GRACE

I am tempted to throw up my hands and say with my friend from seminary, "We need to forget denominations. The struggle is not worth it. In fifty years we'll be out of business anyway."

But, then I wonder. Maybe there's a reason this problem keeps resurfacing. Perhaps, like that early conflict about meat and vegetables, there really is a more important theological concept that God wants us to grasp. And perhaps that theological principle is not all that different from the principle that the early church needed to learn from their conflict about eating non-kosher meat.

What is that principle that we need to learn? I suggest that we can answer that question in one word, grace. Grace is not just something that we talk about. Grace is something that we live. Our tolerance toward fellow Christians with whom we disagree is an expression of God's grace.

Now by tolerance I don't mean just tolerating someone for the sake of peace. Christian tolerance means seeking out the person with whom you disagree and trying to find some common ground. Christian tolerance is seeing in the face of your opponent a brother or sister who is a part of the family of faith.

Our most important job is worshipping together and praising our common Lord. The kingdom of God does not arrive by majority vote. The kingdom of God comes by the power of God's grace and forgiveness as revealed in Jesus Christ.

OUR DEBT

There one thing that will keep us together in times of disagreement. It is a healthy awareness of our own sin. It is a healthy awareness that each one of us owes a debt that can never be fully repaid.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive a person who wrongs us. Is seven times enough?

Actually, Peter thought he was being quite generous. The rabbis of the day thought that forgiving people three times was more than enough. It sort of sounds like those three strikes and you're out laws doesn't it? But, Peter knew that Jesus was a bit more liberal so he went up to seven on the forgiveness scale. I bet Peter thought "Jesus will be impressed by how generous I am."

But, once again Peter was fooled. Jesus said, "Seven times isn't near enough. I say that you need to forgive seventy times seven." Actually, the translation of this passage is not sure. It could mean that we forgive a person seventy times seven or it could mean seventy seven times. But, the point is still the same. The Kingdom of Heaven as revealed in Jesus Christ is about forgiveness on an unimaginably grand scale. And our willingness to forgive is based upon an understanding of just how much we owe God.

Jesus drove home his point by telling the parable of the unmerciful servant. In essence a servant owed a king a zillion dollars. The king decided enough was enough and was going to put the servant and his family in jail until the debt was paid ... Which would be never.

But, the servant begged. He said that he would try and pay off what he owed. But, on his salary that would take a thousand years. Things looked hopeless. But, then, the unexpected happened. The king forgave the debt. The servant didn't owe anything any more.

And how did the lucky servant respond to his good fortune? He went out and put a fellow servant in jail because he was owed about a \$1,000 dollars. The king heard about it and went back on his word. He put the unmerciful servant into jail and had him tortured for good measure.

The temptation with a parable is to over interpret. This story has just one point, and it is very clear. The unmerciful servant should have considered how much he had been forgiven in his treatment of other people.

And we should do the same. If God has forgiven us a zillion sins, more than we can even imagine ... which He has ... shouldn't we be a bit more compassionate toward those with whom we have disagreements?

In case you're in doubt, the answer to that question is "yes."

Indeed, this passage suggests that perhaps the only "unpardonable" sin is a lack of grace toward others.

I think it was Dante who said that judgment is simply the Father saying to the sinner,
"Thy will be done."

Those who live by the sword die by the sword, and those who live by the letter of the law die by the letter of the law as well. We will be judged by our own ungracious ways.

BLAME VERSUS GRACE

I was deeply saddened by the loss of life and destruction caused by hurricane Katrina. But, I was even more disturbed by all the finger pointing.

Everyone wants to ask, "Who's to blame?" Was it the mayor because he didn't call for an evacuation sooner? Was it the governor because she didn't call in the National Guard sooner? Was it the President because he didn't hire the right man at FEMA? And so forth.

I can understand why people want to place blame. These are terrible times, and there are some questions that need to be answered about our inadequate preparation for the storm.

But, maybe those questions do need to be asked later. Right now we have more important priorities such as saving those who are stranded and putting a major city back together.

During the times of crisis, we need to see that the most important question is not "who sinned?" The most important question is "how can I help?" How can I be gracious to those who are in need?

Blaming others won't get the job done. It never does. Being gracious to others out of a sense of gratitude will get the job done.

One of the most heartwarming sights in this disaster was the appearance of a sizable contingent of NYC firefighters in New Orleans. They said that their presence was "payback" for all the help that they received in their time of need.

They were the first to arrive, and they brought with them a fire truck that had been given to them by the state of Louisiana to replace one destroyed in the attack of 911.

They named that truck the "Spirit of Louisiana," but I think that truck had another name. It was also the "Spirit of Grace." They had been given so much, and they wanted to give back something in return.

I think it was entirely appropriate that as the guys from NYFD arrived a lone fireman from the New Orleans Fire Department played on a bagpipe, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound."

It was heartfelt tune, and it brought about a spirit of grace in a land that was becoming very ungracious.

What about you? Do you live a land that is becoming very ungracious? Do you harbor grudges against a neighbor? Are you afraid of those who are different from you? Do you think that life is unfair?

God has good news for you. In Jesus Christ He gives us something greater than justice. He gives us grace. He forgives our million jillion sins and He calls us to go and do likewise.

May God help us to live by His amazing grace.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN