

One Love

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Romans 14: 1-12

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The scripture reading this morning is from chapter 14 of the Letter of Paul to the Romans. Although scholars believe this to be the last letter that Paul wrote before his death, it is the first letter that appears in the New Testament, perhaps because it is the longest. It's somewhat hard at times to remember that it's one letter, hand written by a scribe, authored by one man, addressed to the Christians living in Rome. Upon its arrival, there isn't any logical reason that it would be discovered, read, and preserved into the 21st century. It came from the obscure province of Judea thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Although Paul was a Roman citizen, he was unknown in this powerful seat of the Roman empire. All of the great writers and poets of the time congregated in Rome. However, not too much time passed before it was discovered. Possibly, it was because of Paul's ability to weave logic, poetry, scripture, and God's history from creation to the resurrection of Jesus into this astounding document of Christian theology that we have access to it today.

Paul, aware that his time is limited, is writing in earnest to his Christian brethren that he has never met. He is clearly concerned about the possibility of this newly formed group of Christ followers splitting into factions. He is addressing both the newly converted Jewish Christians as well as the newly converted Gentile Christians. Paul knows that their practices are at odds with one another. The Jewish Christians have special days set aside to worship in a particular way and the Gentile Christians share none of these customs. The Jewish Christians have special dietary laws of which the Gentile Christians are not a part. Paul says that the early Christians living in Rome are to welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

In the United States, we now have a very large population of young adults from the ages of 18-35 who do not attend church. Many of their parents never went to church so they have no frame of reference, familiarity or experience of church. They have never heard of systematic theology. They are unaware of the countless number of faithful people who have worked diligently over the centuries to interpret scripture. Even these diligent pursuers of truth have come to different conclusions with regard to biblical understanding and the practice of various rituals. These differences have formed the various denominations that we know today. The vast

majority of unchurched people don't know why we fight and criticize one another. They don't know what it's like to be a member of a faith family. They don't know that we are blessed with God's shalom when we commit to the Christian path. How would they know if all they hear about is the great fight to be "right".

I don't think that it's totally our fault. We have been conditioned from early childhood. We venture into our first experience in an elementary school setting at age five or six and quickly learn that the teacher is always in search of the "right" answer. We are delighted when we know it and we wave our hands energetically in the air in hopes that the teacher will call on us. Conversely, when the right answer escapes us, we sink down low into our chairs, in a pool of embarrassment, hoping to be hidden from view. Parents, myself included, now search for the "right" pre-school on up through high school. The search for the "right" college for our children often rears its head somewhere before our children enter junior high. Even searching for the "right" pair of tennis shoes can be mind-boggling. It then follows that we bring this mind-set to the understanding of our Christian faith. We need to be "right", and anyone that does not share our particular understanding of Jesus, or the Bible, or God must be wrong. It's hard to remember, living in the post-modern, post-enlightenment setting that we do, where everything needs to be proven to have any validity, that God is very, very big. Even the word God is a title because the ancient believers knew that God was too magnificent to refer to by name. And, our minds are actually pretty small compared to the Creator of the universe. We need to remind ourselves that only God is capable of being right. This never means that we should give up trying to understand all of the confusing areas in scripture, or what it really means to be God's people. Quite the contrary. We are called to love the Lord in a certain way. We are reminded in Matthew 22:34-40. "When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? He said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." These instructions are

very clear, but in this process, we must hold our various theologies lightly, approaching others with humility.

In his book, *To Change the World – The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, James Hunter skillfully describes the Christian factions that we hear about most in the media. He says that the Christian Right believe that our national leaders live in decadence and the people turn the other way. The Christian Right believes that the epicenter of the problem is the judicial system. The political arena has become the focus of their frustration, and consequently, they must win elections. Their hope is in politics. Hunter says in their attempt to make the world a better place, we hear words like “enemy,” “drive out,” “attack,” “overthrow,” “eradicate the other,” and “take back.” All of these terms reflect a desire for conquest.

The Christian Left are no better in their vengeance to be “right.” They focus on condemning the wealthy for their abuse of the poor, weak, and marginized. The left focuses on progress. They believe that because of the evolutionary process, humankind is capable of advancing and improving. They dream of the perfectibility of human nature. Our ability to reason will bring an end to suffering. But, where is God in this picture? Apparently God is not needed in this formula and has been relegated to the sidelines. Most liberals are uncomfortable using language that deals with faith or God. Christian liberals are hostile to the leaders, organizations, ideology, and the agenda of the Christian Right. Generally, they believe that they are smarter and more sophisticated than the Christian Right. Although their message is different, the Christian progressives are very similar to their politically conservative counterparts. Neo-Anabaptists believe that Christians need to remain pure and live apart from politics and the culture.

If a growing number of young adults from age 18-35 have never experienced church, where and how can they enter into the Church? I know that the issue is much more complex than I am making it sound, but whatever the reason, people that we see throughout the day represent a largely unchurched population. The Church has the reputation of being hypocritical. Christians do not practice what they preach. They try to force their religion on others. Whatever the reason, we have a large generation of young people that we are unable to call back to church because they have no frame of reference in which to return. In other words, they are confused by the fact that there is very little that Christians appear to agree upon. In contemporary times, when many problems of today’s society are solved in the courtrooms, the Church has assumed much of the same posture –

one of antagonism. Arguments over details of biblical interpretation and traditions keep us compartmentalized into our various denominations, and yet, even after we are compartmentalized, we continue to argue and split apart even further. Can you blame people for not wanting to participate? They don’t understand why we’re fighting. Who would want to be part of a church filled with angry people – or so they think?

We have a challenge. If our paradigm regarding “those that are different” from us is seen as a danger or a threat then a stranger is either an ally (if they fall within our conservative or liberal framework) or an enemy if they do not. The potential for the Church to bear witness to the love, grace, mercy and truth of Christ is vast, but not if we insist on fighting and being critical within our various denominations. God’s vision is for shalom among all of creation. When we drop the conservative idea that the human enemy is lurking out there somewhere. Then, we drop the liberal idea that we can handle things ourselves if we just fight hard enough for justice. Then what? What is Paul’s advice for the early Christ followers living in Rome. In verse 7 of Chapter 10, Paul says: “We do not live 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 die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. I believe Paul is saying that we need to take the focus off ourselves and ask the question: What does God want instead of what do we want? In verse 10, Paul asks: “Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.

James Hunter concludes by saying that both the conservative and liberal paradigms – the “defense against” the world and the concern to be “relevant to” the world both speak to biblical concerns. The “defense against” model can be an attempt to retain distinctiveness, but the method has been confrontational and aggressive. The desire to be “relevant to” has paid the price of abandoning distinctiveness. If we sit somewhere in the middle of these two views, we still aren’t off the hook because from this vantage point, we are able to sling pock shots at both sides.

Hunter offers an alternative that he refers to as the “Faithful Presence Within.” He says: “For the Christian, if there is a possibility of human flourishing in a world such as ours, it begins when God’s word of love becomes flesh in us, is embodied in us, is enacted through us, and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks.”

Although we, the Church, have shortcomings,

the truth remains. When scripture is proclaimed, the sacraments administered, and the people seek to follow God in word and deed, God is at work in His people. The Holy Spirit is present transforming lives.

We know that the answer lies in our love for God and one another, but how do we get there from here? In the words of Bono of U2, “Love is a higher law.” Not the Hallmark kind of love, but rather self-sacrificing love. What can we do for you, Lord? How can I best serve you today? We need to receive the kind of love that emerges when we enter into those painful places on the inside and ask for forgiveness. The kind of love that asks us to take risks. To step out of our comfort zones in faith. To enter into God’s plan rather than our own agenda. We need each other. We need to know that God is able to redeem us and make us whole again, day by day by day.

I love Eugene Petersen’s translation of Romans 14: 1-12. He says: A person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume all Christians should be vegetarians and eat accordingly. But since we are both guests at Christ’s table, wouldn’t it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn’t eat? God, after all invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God’s welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.”

How far does God’s invitation reach? Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23. “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” Last week, Reverend Felix Villanueva reminded us about the story of Hagar, Abraham’s Egyptian slave and Ishmael, Hagar’s son by Abraham. When Sarah became jealous of Abraham’s affection for Ishmael, she insisted that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert of Beersheba. Abraham, though he dearly loved Ishmael, complied. When all the water was gone from their canteen, Hagar left the boy in a bush nearby because she couldn’t stand to watch him die. God heard Ishmael crying and the angel of God called down and told Hagar not to worry because God was going to make of him a great nation. It was then that a well appeared and she filled the canteen and gave Ishmael a long cool drink.

God’s love is not exclusive. It extends beyond what is familiar to us. It enters into prisons and flop houses and street corners. The love of God extends into the “hate camps” where young children are being trained to be terrorists. The love of God is unstoppable. Our Lord has “One Love” for all of creation. Jesus lived, died, and rose again to proclaim it. Paul’s life was to share it. We

are invited to do the same. Christ’s table is without end. We’re one. One love.

Romans 14: 1-12

1 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. 6 Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 8 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. 9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister[a]? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. 11 It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’”[b]

12 So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Footnotes:

1. *Romans 14:10* The Greek word for brother or sister (*adelphos*) refers here to a believer, whether man or woman, as part of God’s family; also in verses 13, 15 and 21.

2. *Romans 14:11* *Isaiah 45:23*