

September 13, 2020 – St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Scripture Reading: Romans 14:1-18

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but do not argue with them about their personal opinions. Some people's faith allows them to eat anything, but the person who is weak in the faith eats only vegetables. The person who will eat anything is not to despise the one who doesn't; while the one who eats only vegetables is not to pass judgment on the one who will eat anything; for God has accepted that person. Who are you to judge the servants of someone else? It is their own Master who will decide whether they succeed or fail. And they will succeed, because the Lord is able to make them succeed.

Some people think that a certain day is more important than other days, while others think that all days are the same. We each should firmly make up our own minds. Those who think highly of a certain day do so in honor of the Lord; those who will eat anything do so in honor of the Lord, because they give thanks to God for the food. Those who refuse to eat certain things do so in honor of the Lord, and they give thanks to God. We do not live for ourselves only, and we do not die for ourselves only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For Christ died and rose to life in order to be the Lord of the living and of the dead. You then, who eat only vegetables—why do you pass judgment on others? And you who eat anything—why do you despise other believers? All of us will stand before God to be judged by him. For the scripture says,

“As surely as I am the living God, says the Lord,
everyone will kneel before me,
and everyone will confess that I am God.”

Every one of us, then, will have to give an account to God.

So then, let us stop judging one another. Instead, you should decide never to do anything that would make others stumble or fall into sin. My union with the Lord Jesus makes me certain that no food is of itself ritually unclean; but if you believe that some food is unclean, then it becomes unclean for you. If you hurt others because of something you eat, then you are no longer acting from love. Do not let the food that you eat ruin the person for whom Christ died! Do not let what you regard as good get a bad name. For God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of the righteousness, peace, and joy which the Holy Spirit gives. And when you serve Christ in this way, you please God and are approved by others.

Message: Held in Common

Imagine for a moment that we each of us own a farm,
and that we've all got...let's say our own flock of sheep.
We each send our sheep out to eat grass in our fields,
and every time the grass gets too low in one spot,
we fence them out of there,
and move them on to the next one
so the grass can grow back.

That way, there's always somewhere
on our farms with grass
for the sheep.

Now imagine that smack in the middle of all our farms,
there's one common field.
It doesn't belong to any of us,
but we're all welcome to use it.
This story is used to talk philosophically
about how we take care of things that we hold in common,
rather than what we own as individuals.
Which fields are we going to invest in and take better care of?
Our own farm, on which we will live for years
and maybe even sell someday to retire to town?
Or that common land,
there for the benefit of us all,
but not belonging
to any one of us?

While I imagine that we'd all be good neighbours to one another
who wouldn't take advantage,
the assumption is that the common field
will be eaten down to dirt and uncared for,
since no one has a personal interest
in looking after
what is held in common.

This story, by the way, is called the "tragedy of the commons."
Our church is something we hold in common, too.
No one of us owns it or is fully responsible for it;
church is something we're called to,
a place and a community of people
that Jesus himself died and rose to new life
to invite us into.
But we don't own it,
do we.

If I posed the question, who belongs in church,
I hope our answers would be
that everyone who chooses to, or is called by Jesus to be here
belongs here.
But if I posed the question,
who doesn't belong in church...
...I wonder how we might answer that.

This situation, this question

– about how we care for one another
 and who belongs and doesn't belong in the church
 – is the very question the churches in Rome were facing,
 though they didn't really know that themselves.
 The apostle Paul wrote them a letter
 to help them work out how to be
 the church together
 in a way that puts love
 – love for God
 and love for others –
 ahead of everything else.

Paul starts out by talking...vegetables!
 The person who is weak in faith, Paul writes, only eats vegetables.
 This is not, in fact, an argument against vegetarianism.

The church in Rome was not made up of
 identical, matching, cookie-cutter Christians.
 They came from all sorts of backgrounds,
 as diverse as any urban church today.

Those early Christians had all sorts of different beliefs
 about how to be the church and how to go about their daily lives.
 Those who had practiced the Jewish faith and followed Jewish law
 before becoming Christian,
 they had very specific ideas about food:
 what was ritually clean and okay for them to eat,
 and what was unclean.

Most of the meat available to purchase in Rome
 would have either been killed in an unclean way
 or had been used in temple sacrifices to Roman gods and goddesses;
 either way, no culturally Jewish Christian
 who followed all the Jewish laws and rules
 would ever eat that meat;
 they were absolutely sure
 that it would dishonour God
 for them to do so.

But the other Christians,
 who came from other places and had other beliefs,
 didn't mind;
 meat was meat, and it could be eaten,

with all gratitude and honour directed to God.

And then there's the argument about holy days, too:
the Sabbath – should it be kept?
Or was any day a good day to worship God?
– and celebrating - or not celebrating –
other holy days and festivals.

Do those who refuse to eat meat and want to worship on a special day
belong in the church?
Or those who eat meat and don't bother about Sabbaths
– do they belong in the church?
Who belongs and who doesn't?

If they were hoping for a decisive word from Paul on either subject...
...well, they didn't get it.
The problem, according to Paul,
is not whether to eat meat or not,
or honour all the holy days.

The problem is the way they're treating each other:
the person who thinks every day is a fine day for worship
or who will eat anything is not to despise those who don't, says Paul;
while the one who eats only vegetables
is not to pass judgment
on the one who will eat anything.

You are missing the point, says Paul.
The heart of the matter,
the essence of our faith
is that we do not live for ourselves only,
and we do not die for ourselves only;
we belong to the Lord
and everything we do
ought to honour Jesus
and all that God gives us
through him.

How many differences of opinion can a group tolerate
before it stops being a group, and falls apart?
Which differences divide,
and which differences enrich a church,

a community of believers?

Well, post-Bible times,
the Christian Church has mostly thought
that any difference is a good reason to part company.

Have you ever wondered why there are so many different denominations,
different variations on the theme of church?

Catholics and Protestants?

Anglicans, Presbyterians, United Church,
Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, and sometimes
even different branches of each one of those...

...I could go on!

It's because at some point,
we disagreed with each other over our beliefs
or how we live them out
or the best way to be the church,
and the group breaks up,
and new churches are formed.

Some of those differences were important,
but some of them maybe weren't.

Within churches, we often find differences of opinion on all sorts of things,
both faith- and Bible-related and just the things we do together.

People get hurt or frustrated because they
don't know church customs or their Bibles very well
or the way things have always been done,
and the only help they get sometimes
is being told they're wrong.

Too many people who grew up going to church,
who maybe tried it once or twice...

...they stop, because they are hurt so badly.

Uncertainty or disagreements can arise
simply because some people feel very strongly
that things ought to be done in one specific way
and that's the only way to do it
if it's going to honour God.

Let's say, oh, that I thought that pew cushions could only be upholstered in red...

...and one of you might believe,
with just as much conviction and desire to honour God,
that pew cushions can only be upholstered in blue.
Do both of us belong in church?

What's more important: that we agree on the colour,
 or that there's a nice comfy cushion
 to welcome both of us
 when we come to worship?
 Which honours God more?

Maybe that sounds like a silly example,
 but we hold our beliefs very dearly, sometimes, rightly so;
 and for those long-ago churches in Rome,
 those beliefs spoke to the most ordinary things imaginable:
 meat and vegetables.

So Paul wrote to them: let's stop judging one another.
 Because really, that's what this vegetable question boiled down to:
 those long-ago Christians, it seems, thought that
 it was more important to decide who was right
 so they could call the other person wrong.

According to Paul, that's not the way to go about being the church;
 if you're going to judge anything, he wrote,
 judge whether or not what you're doing
 will cause another person to stumble or even fall...
 ...into sin, or away from the church.
 We can be together
 – we can be one body, one church –
 united in our love for God
 and each other,
 and in our faith in Jesus, and not all think or be exactly the same.

Now, before we go any further,
 it's important to remember that this quite radical advice
 that Paul is giving falls towards the end of his letter
 to the churches in Rome.

And it's a letter in two parts:
 the first part is all about what Christians believe
 about Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit,
 about sin and love,
 and every other aspect, every truth of Christian faith.

There's sort of a pivot point at the beginning of Romans 12,
 where Paul advises his readers to present themselves
 as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

He goes on to say that we are not to be conformed
to this world, but instead we are to be transformed
by the renewal of our minds;
that way, we'll learn how to
discern God's will.
And it's only after that,
Paul unpacks the practical implications
of being living sacrifices and having our minds and hearts
transformed and renewed
by the creative, loving power of God.
And that's where we read from today.

So it's not an uninformed, free-wheeling kind of approach to Christian faith
that Paul's advocating for, here.
What he's saying is much more challenging than that.

For those who are strong in their faith
– who've got four-wheel drive when it comes
to navigating the stumbling blocks and obstacles of life –
we may need to let go of our desire
to do what we want
in favour of following
Christ's command to love.

If doing our own thing, asserting our own rightness
so we can judge others wrong,
if acting uncaringly and un-cautiously
from our own deeply-held beliefs
about being the church together,
if that causes someone with a new or fragile faith
to stumble,
then we are doing something
much worse than whatever we
were judging them for.

We are breaking the one law Christ gave us:
to love God, and to love others.
Avoiding our own retelling of the tragedy of the commons
may mean giving something up to serve Jesus better
whether it's steak dinners or red pew cushions.
It means acting for the good
of what we hold and tend to in common –
the good of the body of Christ,

the good of other Christians –
rather than for ourselves.

And if giving something up and acting for the good of all sounds familiar,
well, it should;

that is the kind of decision-making
that Jesus himself showed us in his death on the Cross;
and it's the kind of living that Jesus leads us to,
through the transforming power
of the good news.

Thanks be to God. Amen.