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September 21, 2008

We Belong To God
Romans 14:8b

There are times in our lives when the future confronts us in painful and frightening ways. For many of us September 11, 2001 was such a time. It was a moment when our faith was stretched to the limit and we were forced to come to terms with our vulnerability. Many people found themselves looking to the future through a new lens of fear.

Paul's letter to the church at Rome was written to a people who had good reason to be anxious about their future. The church had already experienced a frightening level of persecution. Church leaders had been jailed and executed. The cultural climate threatened not only the mission of the church but its very survival. Faced with these pressures the church found itself caught up in internal conflict and dissension.

Paul doesn't tell us very much about this controversy. All we know is that it concerned matters of religious conduct and worship. It appears that one group expressed its fear of the future by trying to enforce strict observance of religious rules. They wanted to define the church in terms of very narrow boundaries. Another group resented these changes and pushed back. They preferred more flexible guidelines for participation in the community of faith.

There is much about the controversy in the church in Rome which sounds contemporary. We live in a time when the church is under threat from a culture that worships money and power. This is a time when saber rattling is in vogue and the gospel of love is suspect. Fear of the future and the kind of change it might bring has pushed denominational conflict to an all time high. People within the church have learned to mimic the culture by declaring their spiritual superiority over others. Congregations are bombarded with propaganda encouraging them to break away from denominations that are large and diverse in favor of fellowships that are considered to be more pure. In the words of one observer:

Christians have repeatedly chosen to leave the table of our Lord rather than abide in the brokenness of his body. Divide and conquer has replaced reform and renew...The Bible and tenets of faith...are reinvented as instruments of division (Craig Kocher, *Christian Century*, September 9, 2008, page 22).

We know something about the controversy that confronted Paul. Paul's letter shows that he refused to take sides in that conflict. He was less concerned with the particular merits of the arguments on each side than with the impact of dissension on the ministry of the church. Paul moved beyond the arguments and the complaints to try to re-focus the people's fear of the future. Paul understood that the greatest threat to the church was not an external threat. The greatest threat was from within as people allowed themselves to be controlled by their fear and turned against each other in destructive ways. Paul tried to convince them that the best cure for their fear was to remember who they were. By virtue of their baptism they belonged to God. People who know that are ready for whatever the future may bring.

A fearful time in the life of a young man named John Calvin came when he was removed from his post as leader of the Church in Geneva in present day Switzerland. Calvin and his partner, William Farel, got on the wrong side of city authorities and were banished from Geneva before their program of church reform could be fully implemented. Calvin went to the city of Strasbourg where reports reached him concerning events in Geneva. Calvin biographer, T. H. L. Parker, describes that time in these words:

For a year after the expulsion of the ministers, the city had kept on a moderately even keel politically, but the Church life had declined seriously. The Genevese had got the sort of ministers they thought they wanted, without moral or intellectual weight, unable to exert authority. The followers of Calvin and Farel misguidedly tried to remain loyal to their exiled leaders and thus were forming parties within the Church. Calvin, aware of what was going on, did his best to put the evils right. In a pastoral letter to the Church he ... argued that Christians should hate schism and do everything they can to avoid it. If they see that God's Word is being preached and the Sacraments administered, they should recognize the existence of a Church there, whatever the ministers are like and even if the doctrine taught is not so pure as it should be...Calvin wrote 'I cannot hear without great and intense horror that any schism should settle within the Church (*John Calvin: A Biography*, pages 77 & 78).'

Calvin knew that there was much more at stake in Geneva than whether he had been treated fairly. He looked beyond his personal wounds and his theological disagreements with Genevan authorities. He chose to follow the example of Paul in calling his former parishioners to remember who they were. The church is not a collection of people who agree on all the issues. The church is a community where the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments of grace are celebrated. Through Word and Sacrament we learn that we belong to God. That is the antidote for fear.

In the 14th chapter of Romans, Paul said it like this: "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 (Romans 14:8)."