

Sermon – “The Weak Eat Only Vegetables”
Sunday, September 17, 2017
Scripture Readings: Romans 14:1-12, Romans 14:12-15:6
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Today’s scripture comes from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. Hear these words from Romans chapter 14, verses 1 – 12.

14:1 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.

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Our 2nd reading continues where the 1st left off: Romans 14:12, continuing through chapter 15, verse 6. Listen for God’s word to you.

13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. 15 If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. 16 So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. 19 Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. 20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; 21 it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. 22 The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. 23 But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

15:1 We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³ For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” ⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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I asked members of our Wednesday evening bible study this past week a few questions which I am going to ask all of you.

Raise your hand if you are comfortable with the situation of the world today.

Raise your hand if you are comfortable with the situation of the United States today.

Raise your hand if you are comfortable with the role the Christian Church is playing in those situations.

I did not see many hands up. If this is the truth of how we feel about things, then we have a lot of work to do, don't we? I don't know about you, but between natural disasters and the disasters human beings have created and work every minute to create, I have been feeling a heightened sense of urgency about making the rubber meet the road when it comes to faith. The uncertainties, fears, and wrongs of the world around us are reminders that a meaningful and true faith can be neither a pure academic exercise of the mind nor merely a self-oriented quest of personal spiritual peace but must be lived. Our faith, if it follows Jesus Christ, bestows upon us a role in the lives and well-being of the people with whom we share our neighborhood, our nation, and planet earth.

But sometimes we have to back up a step, and the Apostle Paul reminds us, in today's readings, of something very important about how we undertake to live as Christians: it starts right here, among us, the church. Paul makes one thing very clear. We give glory to God by our harmoniousness. The nature and character of the church—either harmonious and in accord with itself, or fractured and marred by disunity—enables or undermines our mission. The church's existence cannot be a worshipful, glorifying, answer-giving, world-changing thing if its existence is discord and the life of the church largely consists of the passing of judgment back and forth.

Paul starts out in what might sound like kind of weird territory to us. “Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.”¹ In fact, there's quite a lot of talk in here about foods and such. Eating particular foods or abstaining, drinking wine or not, clean and unclean dietary practices...not usually the stuff of our church conversations in the present era.

I did have a dream the other night about scripture and food, one of the odder dreams I've had lately. I found myself back at school for an event that my mind concocted from who knows what part of my imagination: Princeton Theological Seminary's annual competition in exegetical cooking. It was apparently a big deal!

¹ Romans 14:2 (New Revised Standard Version).

The day of the competition, a passage from scripture would be revealed, and each of the three teams had to attempt to interpret that passage in meal form. Not just by producing a single dish, either—your team had to provide an entire sit-down meal as the staff of a restaurant. I found myself pulling aside part of my team and giving my thoughts on something I suspected the other teams were neglecting to consider but which the judges certainly would not: how we entered and delivered the food. I wanted a dozen of us, in black tie, all to enter single-file at once and serve to all tables simultaneously.

I'm not sure what that says about the odd places my mind wanders to. But I think the judges of that competition would have some difficulty if today's reading was the passage used in the contest. They would be in a rather uncomfortable spot, judging us on how well our food symbolized scripture which says not to judge people over their food.

For Paul's words here, to the casual listener, might sound like they are merely elaborations and interpretations of all those religious food laws found in places such as Leviticus and Deuteronomy, but they are actually not that at all. In fact, they aren't even really about food.

Food was a controversy of the time, to be sure. Most Christians at the time were also Jews, but not all of them, and when you take people used to expressing faithfulness to God partly through a carefully observed diet and mix them together with people having no such background, then throw on top the new teachings of the apostles who are rumored to be eating all sorts of un-kosher things, there is bound to be confusion and controversy over what is allowed, what is not, who is being diligently faithful, and who is slacking off.

Moreover, meat purchased in the markets of that place and time had a greater-than-zero possibility of having been slaughtered as a sacrifice to idols, which was worrying to Christians concerned about loyally worshiping only the one, true God.

Paul's own perspective on those particular matters is fairly clear, both here and elaborated upon elsewhere in his letters. In reality, he teaches, all foods are clean to us in our freedom as Christians; and as for food sacrificed to idols, well, since those are false gods and not real, the food being dedicated to them is meaningless. There are no gods out there to whom that food has *truly* been given, and so we aren't *actually* partaking in other gods when we eat their food.²

But interestingly, he doesn't then come down on the side of eating meat freely. To our ears he sounds like it, maybe, at first—"the weak eat only vegetables," he declares, after all. But if you read on, you find that weakness to him isn't a disparaging term; it is simply a descriptive one.

A bully might say you are weak, and this is a personal belittlement. But a doctor or physical therapist might use the same word, speaking about a muscular weakness in your body, and he or she is not being insulting; in fact, the medical professional is being helpful.

Likewise, Paul is simply naming a reality: the church is full of people at all different points in their surety of faith. Some are convinced that they are fully free in Christ. Their faith in this Gospel is strong. Others are more nervous; their convictions have less strength; they are cautious about giving up rules they have always understood to signify faithful living. Presumably there is a whole spectrum from weak to strong, uncertainty to maturity. Likely all of us move along that spectrum over the course of our lives, and probably we even wander back and forth on it at different points.

² See also 1 Corinthians 8.

Paul refuses to look down on those whose faith is weak, but welcomes them instead. And yet, neither does he celebrate weakness, nor say it is as good to be weak as to be strong. He says something much more challenging but also much more loving. He says that, both weak and strong, we are unified in purpose and in whom we serve, and that passing judgment on one another is not our job.

I read someone's personal story a little while back of being overweight and struggling with trying to get in shape. There was an outdoor track right nearby. It was convenient, and she knew a morning routine of walking and running there would be a positive thing for her health, but she was anxious about trying it. Why?

Because other people went there to run in the morning. And most of those people were thin, fit, and capable of running for miles. She knew they'd notice her, and see her, over and over, every time around that track, and she just knew every time they passed one another she was going to feel them looking down on her plodding pace and her large frame, mentally having a laugh at the silly, obviously out-of-place person who amusingly decided to show up on the track today.

How surprised she was then, the day she finally got up the determination to go anyway, and the first person she saw smiled at her not in laughter, but in friendliness. Not just the first person, either. People were not sneering but encouraging. Everyone out there, completely contrary to her expectations, treated her with respect and welcome, treated her not as something alien to the place or lesser than they, someone to be looked down on, but simply as the newest member of the club of persons who came out to that track together early in the morning to work on their fitness.

Every single person there knew something she hadn't thought about: that they, too, once upon a time had a first day that they started running to get in shape. The people they considered their own, their teammates, toward whom they were insistently supportive, were not those who *were* fit, but those who were in it together with them in the battle to *be* fit.

What if the church could more be like that? What if we saw that whether it is our door or the door of that much-different church down the road, everyone who walks through that door seeking after Christ is a teammate of ours in the hard work of trying to become good disciples? So often our sense of kinship with others is not defined by our shared devotion to Christ, but by our groupings of those who have the rules right and those whom we look down upon as having the rules absurdly wrong. But what if our attitude were instead defined by lifting one another up in encouragement and mutual respect?

In Paul's context, he obviously believes eating meat is perfectly okay. But there is a reason, despite not believing in anyone's rules against eating meat, that he doesn't just say, "Forget about other people's silly rules; do what you want." Because to him, that's just selfish. It is supposed to be about mutually building one another up. Yes, he says, the excessive holiness rules some people have are actually coming out of weakness—but so what? Is your job as a strong person among weak persons to stand proudly in contrast to them? Or is it to use that strength to stand with and bear with those who are weaker, assisting them to remain standing?

One of the lessons I hope to drive home to my own son is that his job as the older sibling is never, ever to take advantage of his position of strength to push around, make fun, or mistreat. His role as the older one, the stronger one, the more experienced one, is to look out for. His strength can become strength to which his younger sibling looks for comfort and help.

And so Paul reminds the strong: if you're so strong in your faith, if you really believe your salvation is in Christ and that the things of the world are as nothing in comparison, then what is it to you whether you eat meat or not? Or to substitute a perhaps more relatable situation, if you are someone who can take or leave alcohol, for whom a drink is a matter of little consequence, then it should be an easy matter for you to leave alcohol alone when at the table with someone for whom social drinking is an occasion for falling. Are we to live out our individual freedom without regard for the blast effects it may have on others? Or do we as Christians have a duty to make choices with constant regard for the people around us?

He does point out that the love and respect for our common purpose are meant to go both ways. The weak, following the rules they have carefully set for themselves, are not to judge the strong, either, for failing to live according to those rules. We human beings find no shortage of reasons to judge ourselves superior, a constant impulse for us to fight if we are to follow the one whom we call Lord, one who humbled himself to come to us.

The scripture we've heard today is as important today as when written. Paul is talking about people of differences in belief and practice being welded together by a commonality which is greater. He acknowledges the confusion found in seeking to live rightly, and honors everyone in their attempts.

Here is something worth noting for those of us who sometimes get frustrated at how hard it is to know what is right: scripture itself, in this letter from Paul, recognizes the complexity and difficulty in fully understanding what is required of us. This passage recognizes difference of opinion within the body of Christ, and expresses that more than one kind of living—even, perhaps, those based on a wrong understanding—can give honor to God when we are living that way in honor of the Lord.

Note that this does not stop Paul from speaking or teaching the actual truth as he has perceived it. Don't mistake this for him saying all of the opinions are just as good. Paul is constantly trying to bring the weak to strength and the ignorant to wisdom. Quarreling may not be okay, or judging, but making a case for the real truth of things is not ruled out.

He speaks rather of voluntarily limiting oneself for the benefit of another, while our differences persist carrying extra burdens on one another's behalf. And Paul reminds us of something we constantly forget: harmoniousness in Christ does not require being in full agreement about everything. He speaks of honoring one another's motives and Christian identity, working things out together without contentiousness, pretentiousness, and self-righteous judgmentalism in our disputes.

To what will the church witness in this world?

To nothing, if we cannot even witness to one another of the kind of brotherliness, sisterliness, and mutual care that our Lord asks of us.

To nothing, if our defining characteristic is incoherent factionalism.

But to be in harmony—this brings a witness of something. This transforms us, from fragmented mess into a unified body of which people will take note.

The world needs Christ, and we are Christ's body. Our fellow Christians need us, journeying together down the confusing, difficult path of discipleship, with the poor vision and limited understanding we all have. Let us be there for one another, and be there for the world. May God grant us, and may we receive and cherish, the gift of unity that our Lord prayed his disciples would be given.

Amen.