

Romans 14:1-12 1Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. 2Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3Those 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. 4Who 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. 5Some 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. 6Those 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. 7We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8If 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. 9For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. 10Why 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. 11For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." 12So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Romans 14:1-12

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"On Keeping Perspective"

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Earlier this week, my world was jolted a bit when a friend complained about the Sesame Street theme song. His complaint: they never actually tell us how to get there. Answer the question!"

Now, I'm 46 years old, and it's been a while since my kids were small, so I had to stop and think about that for a second: Sunny day, chasing the clouds away, on my way to where the air is sweet, can you tell me how to get, how to get to Sesame Street? He's right! They never tell you how to get to Sesame Street. What about the next verse? Come and play; everything's A-okay! Friends and neighbors there, that's where we meet; can you tell me how to get, how to get to Sesame Street? Nope. No directions. There are few things more frustrating than knowing you want to be somewhere and having no idea how to get there!

But one of the few things that might be more frustrating, I think, would be to know of an incredible place not far away at all where an amazing person was readily accessible to the people, and to have precise GPS directions for how to experience that place, but have everyone around you insist on trying to get there with either inaccurate or out-of-date maps. Okay, maybe I'm stretching a little, but that's basically the situation of the apostle Paul some two thousand years ago in our lesson today from Romans 14.

The Kingdom of God is right here among you. You experience it by loving God and neighbor, says Paul. And someone says, "You can't go there if you eat meat!" and someone else says "Yes you can!" And someone says, "You can't go there unless you observe certain holy days and keep the Sabbath", and someone else says "Oh yes you can!" No you can't! Yes you can! No you can't! Yes you can! And pretty soon, instead of one worshipping community, there's two, then four, then eight, and so on. It reminds me of a Monty Python skit from *The Life of Brian*, where Brian is talking to a small group of people who call themselves the People's Front of Judea. When Brian wants to join, they ask if he hates the Romans. Brian affirms that he does, and the leader of the group says, "Alright you're in. Now, the only people we hate more than the Romans are the Judean People's Front!" "Yeah", says another, "and we hate the Judean Popular People's Front!" And a third chimes in, "Yeah! And we hate the People's Front of Judea!" The leader says, "Wait! We're the People's Front of Judea!" And the guy answers. "Are we? I thought we were the Popular Front of Judea..."

Monty Python, of course, create humor by drawing human frailties to absurd extremes, but there is social commentary under the surface. How easily groups fray into smaller ones over things that really don't matter all that much. And that's what Paul is addressing here.

Now let me add a bit of context. The opening verses seem to have to do with who is eating what. In Rome, the vast majority of the meat sold at the market had been sacrificed to one Roman god or another—in other words, to an idol. In fact, most markets were in the squares outside these pagan temples, and the money raised there—you guessed it—went right back into the coffers of these pagan temples. Jewish law taught that to eat such meat and to support such business was tantamount to worshipping the idol. We might assume, then, that the Jews did not eat the meat, while the gentiles did. But it's worth noting that Paul does not speak of Jews or gentiles in this instance. That's because the 'battle lines' (for lack of a better term) didn't fall that neatly. There were many Jewish Christians, like Paul, who had come to see the dietary laws as part of an old covenant from which they'd been freed by the death and resurrection of Christ, and by the institution of a new covenant of grace. Other Jewish Christians disagreed. They saw the dietary restrictions as part of their identity and their witness in the world. Some gentiles continued to eat and drink as they always had, understanding their new faith in Christ as a matter of the heart, not the dinner table. Other gentiles, knowing that Jesus was born and raised Jewish, sought to follow those dietary laws as a way of identifying with Christ, and of making a tangible change in lifestyle to accompany the rebirth of the heart. So you've got both groups on both sides of the issue. It's not a simple thing.

What riles me—what really gets under my skin—is the way that Paul opens this passage about not judging each other. “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables...” Do you see that Paul is making a judgment in calling the vegetarians ‘weak’? Why doesn't he say, “Some believe in eating anything, while others eat only vegetables...” Why does he label the one group as weak? Isn't he just fueling the very problem he's trying to address? It is clear that to Paul, those who needed more order, more regulation, more guidelines were “weaker” in faith than those who experienced the freedom of simply trusting in the grace of God alone. I see what he's getting at, but it still irks me. I can only conclude that this is one of those instances where we catch a glimpse of the humanness of Paul, who seems to undermine his own argument without realizing it. But lest we get hung up on one verse, we would do well to look at the arc of his argument, which is best summed up in verse 4: Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another?

In the end, all of us answer to God. We are all employed by the same boss. We're all children of the same parent, and we're responsible first and foremost to God. Now please don't get me wrong: this is not to say that we have no responsibility to each other. We do. In fact, it is our love for God that leads us to turn that love outward to the world as well. But our responsibility to one another is to build each other up—not tear each other down. Yet, notice Paul's words. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat. Despise? Pass Judgment? This isn't a philosophical difference of opinion. It's gotten personal. It's gotten mean. And that's the problem.

Says Paul: not everything we do has eternal consequences. If you eat meat or don't, if you worship on Sunday morning or Wednesday night, if you wear suits and dresses or jeans and tee-shirts—these are not matters of eternal significance. Love, respect, living and dying for Christ—these are.

So we may well ask: can you tell me how to get, how to get to a place where people worship together, witness to the love of God together, even if they disagree on what's okay to eat...or how to dress...or when to worship? Can you tell me how to get, how to get to a place where people worship together, witness to the love of God together, even if they disagree on what to do with people in the country illegally... or how to regulate Wall Street...or when to restrict gun sales? Which is not to say that these issues don't matter. Quite the contrary. It is simply to say that vilifying or condemning another over one particular issue or another is to put oneself in the place of God.

Now let me hasten to add that part of the reason I'm preaching this message this morning is because I stand convicted. I see posts on Facebook that just incense me, they make me so mad, they seem so cruelly insensitive, so willfully ignorant, so blatantly partisan. To which my husband Brad will say, "why do you let this bother you? It's only Facebook." And he's so right. I let things get to me, and it colors my perceptions of people I like and care about in ways that aren't good for any of us. So I need to spend less time online, clearly. But in pandemic, it's sometimes my only point of connection. Which doesn't make my attitude okay. So I must repent, and conclude that I would do well to ask myself two simple questions. Maybe they would help you too.

Here they are: First, am I sure that I have all the information? "In early January 1963, a national newspaper ran a photo of United States senators taking the oath of office, after which, they received a critical and sarcastic letter. The writer complained, "The senator from Hawaii doesn't know his right hand from his left." Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii took the oath with his left hand raised and not the right one. But there was something the picture in the newspaper did not show, and the critical writer did not know. After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Dan Inouye joined the army. He fought in Italy and won the Distinguished Service Cross, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart with clusters. When he took the oath of office as a senator, he did it with his left hand raised because he lost his right arm in the service of his country. [Contributed by Hardy Denham, original source unknown; as used in "The Terrible Burden Of Judging Others" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.]

I recall a story told by a colleague of mine who was invited to preach a series of sermons at a week-long revival meeting. As he stood up to preach the first night, he happened to notice a couple sitting down in the second row. The woman listened attentively to his sermon. The man slept through most of it. They were there again the next, and my colleague began to get discouraged. "If I'm that boring," he thought to himself, "why doesn't the guy just stay home? It's disheartening to put one's heart and soul into a sermon only to have another sleep through it!" He found himself feeling angry and disgruntled when the sleeping man was there the third night. Sure, there were many who were touched by his sermons, but to have that guy right down in front... Well, it really frustrated him. The fourth night, the sleeping man's wife approached the preacher before the evening got underway. She told him how deeply moved she and her husband both were by his commitment to Christ and to doing good in the world for those who suffered. And the preacher thought to himself, "yeah right. Sure. I can tell your husband is really moved." Thankfully, he didn't say that out loud, because she went on to describe how her husband had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer two months ago. His health was declining rapidly, and his pain was being controlled by medicine that made him tired. But her husband had heard this preacher speak many years ago, and had been praying for his ministry and supporting his mission to the inner city for a long time, and she explained, "He was just bound and determined to be here no matter what." My colleague later noted that he fell to his knees in prayer that evening, having learned a valuable lesson. "All that week, I'd been seeing that man," he told us, "but because I judged without all the facts, what I saw sapped me of strength, and how sad, when it could have been building me up and energizing me that whole time." [Original source unknown. I heard this story told by a colleague, but I can't remember who it was.] Oh, how important it is to have all the information before we judge another. Because we never know what in a person's backstory might enlighten us to where they're coming from.

The second question worth asking is this: Am I in a position to judge? Peter once asked Jesus "How many times should I forgive?" But Jesus turned the question on its ear, suggesting that we'd do better to ask, "how many times have I been forgiven?" Start there, and everything shifts. Judgmentalism and fury are replaced by humility and empathy. How many times have I missed the mark? How many times have I hurt someone? How many times have I failed to be God's light in the world? If we could only remember our own condition when we're tempted to criticize someone else, we'd be far less likely to open our mouths.

“French author Victor Hugo has a short story titled, "93." In the midst of this tale a ship at sea is caught in a terrific storm. Buffeted by the waves, the boat rocks to and fro, when suddenly the crew hears an awful crashing sound below deck. They know what it is. A cannon they are carrying has broken loose and is smashing into the ship's sides with every list of the ship. Two brave sailors, at the risk of their lives, go below and manage to fasten it again, for they know that the heavy cannon smashing around on the inside of their ship is far more dangerous to them than the storm on the outside. So it is with people. [from Stephen M. Crotts / George L. Murphy, Sermons For Sundays: After Pentecost (Middle Third): The Incomparable Christ, CSS Publishing Company, Inc, in illustrations for Matthew 18:21-35 on www.esermons.com.]

And that is what Paul is really trying to get at in our lesson for this morning. It's about keeping perspective. It's about living God's light in a dark world. What we think and how we think matters. What's going on 'below decks' in our hearts and minds will affect how we evaluate the world around us, our relationships, and our own self-image. It will either imprison us or free us.

Paul says we are accountable to God for the way we treat others. Accountable is a word we use less and less around the church these days, I suppose because we assume it is a judgmental kind of thing—something that stands in direct opposition to grace. But I don't take it that way. Accountability is a sign of responsibility and maturity, and those are characteristics I want to be said of me. One can only be accountable for something if it is in our power to choose our response or direction. In the baptismal rite this morning, we hear the question: Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you...? God cares deeply about what I choose, what I resist, what I support. We are entrusted with showing God's grace to a judgmental world. This trust God puts in me, in and of itself, is an act of grace. And so I must hold myself accountable to choosing humility over condemnation and empathy over anger. And it's hard. As I've already noted: I don't always live up to it. But hard as it is, my choices reveal the deepest convictions and staunchest commitments of my heart. When all is said and done, I don't need to know how to get to Sesame Street. But I do need to know how to let go of resentment, lest it destroy me like a loose cannon. I need to know how to see people beyond issues, lest I become hardened and bitter. I need to know that I don't always know the whole story, lest I descend into smug conceit or narcissism. I need know that there is a place where God will buoy my hope, nourish in me a love for others, and bury me in the water of grace to rise again to new life. To get to the Kingdom here and now, Paul's directions are clear and concise: we welcome as we have been welcomed. Period. Friends and neighbors, that's where we meet, and I promise you this; it's even better than Sesame Street. Amen.