

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 Not Living to Ourselves"

Rev. Amy Terhune

There's an old story about a woman who happens to gaze out her window one brisk fall morning to discover a dead mule in her front yard. It's not the kind of thing you encounter very often, and she is beside herself. How did it get there? Where did it come from? And how on earth does one get rid of it? Not having a clue how to deal with such a debacle, she calls the city offices, and gets shuffled from one extension to another before her call finally lands in animal control. A dead mule? In your front yard? And it's not yours? Yes, we'll come get it.

A couple of hours later, Animal Control pulls into her driveway, but by this time, the woman has changed her mind. As the two fellows get out of the truck, she approaches them on the lawn with a hundred dollar bill and asks them if they would please put the mule in her bathtub, and come back and get it tomorrow.

The officer with Animal Control is astonished. "You want us to do *what?*" he demands.

"I want you to take that dead mule into the house and put it in the bathtub, and then come back and get it tomorrow. I'll pay you for your trouble."

By this point the jaws of both officers are all but dragging on the ground. "Put it in your bathtub??? Why???"

"Well," she says crisply. "Every day for the past thirty-five years, my husband comes home from work, drops his stuff on the floor by the back door, grabs a beer from the fridge, plops down in front of the TV, and asks, "What's new, hon?" For once, I'd like to have an answer!" [traditional.]

The story does not tell us if Animal Control complied. I rather suspect not, although I appreciate this poor woman's desire to shake things up a little. Most of us hunger for newness if we get stuck in the same rut for too long.

Twenty centuries ago, when the Apostle Paul first began writing to the emerging Christian Communities around the Roman Empire, he faced an interesting conundrum. How does one honor the long and devout Jewish History out of which Jesus arises with the radical newness of faith that Jesus advances? How does one honor an old covenant while embracing a new one? If we need roots and wings to flourish, how do we balance those things? From our earliest days, the church has faced conflict and difference of opinion over how to balance tradition and innovation.

As Chapter 14 of Paul's letter to the Romans takes shape, it is clear that there's conflict. They can't seem to agree on what is okay to eat. See, the vast majority of meat available in the city at that time was meat that had first been sacrificed to a god of one sort or another. It's Rome, after all. They've got bazillions of gods, or so it seemed. And every one of those gods needs to be kept happy. So farmers bring their livestock into town, and they've got a guaranteed buyer: the pagan temple, which needs a constant stream of sacrificial animals. They buy the livestock at the state-approved price and the farmer goes home assured he's done his patriotic duty. But what to do with it once it's been sacrificed? You can't waste it, but you can sell it. It's a good system.

Unless, of course, you're a Jew. Most markets were in the squares outside these pagan temples, and the money raised there 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 worshiping 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. Likewise, 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? I don't have an answer, but for what it's worth, it bugs me. However, lest we get hung up on one verse, we would do well to look at the arc of Paul's 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. More on that in a moment. 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 therein lies the problem.

Says Paul: not everything 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. But devotion to God, living lovingly – these are weightier matters.

In the newsletter earlier this week, I referenced a quote from John Wesley back in 1750. Remember that methodism did not start out as a church. It started as a movement within the Church of England – a movement of people who wanted greater personal accountability for their faith development; who wanted to study scripture and serve the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the new working class rising up in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. They met with fierce resistance. They were too methodical, too disciplined, too concerned with the economic affairs of business, and gave too much power to the average joe. In an effort to try to bridge growing divides, John Wesley asked, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding

these smaller differences.” Love was the unifier, he argued. But Wesley didn’t pull that out of hat. He pulled it from Paul – and specifically, from this chapter in Romans. Sadly, he was not able to convince his colleagues in the Church of England. When two of his preachers were tarred and feathered, Wesley had no choice but register the Methodists as a dissenting church in order to secure the protection of the crown. But he never wanted to. He wanted us to live our convictions lovingly – to build each other up rather than burn each other down.

I don’t think I need to ask how this might be relevant today. We live in a world increasingly divided, and increasingly mean about it. We do despise each other. We circle the wagons. We listen for what we want to hear. But we’d do well to ask ourselves two important questions when we’re tempted to lash out.

First, are we sure we have all the information? Father Michael Mulvaney, a speaker and counselor on self-esteem, traveled a great distance at his own expense to do a talk for his niece’s high school group. That day the group seemed antsy and inattentive. One small clique in the back had a girl who was so rude that she had her back turned to Father Mulvaney as she blithely went on with her own conversation! Finally, this kind and good but very tired and frustrated man singled out the girl with her back to him, and in an exasperated tone he said, "Look, I've traveled a long way just to be with you today. I deserve to be treated with some respect. You can at least give me the courtesy to turn around and look at me! You have no right to be so rude." The girl was very embarrassed and distressed to be singled out. With tears of humiliation and shame in her eyes she said, "Father, I'm so sorry! But these are our deaf students, and I was translating your talk for them." As you can imagine, Father Mulvaney wanted to drop through a hole in the ground and never reappear. [from Lilly Walters, *Secrets Of Successful Speakers*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993) as used in “The Terrible Burden Of Judging Others” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Most of us have no idea of the pain or burdens that others carry. We see only a small cross-section of their life. We don’t know the abuses or tragedies they’ve weathered, the inner battles they fight. If we did, we’d probably be more compassionate.

A second question worth asking is whether we’re in a position to judge at all? 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.

Recently, I heard about a teacher who brought a big basket of potatoes to class. Each of the children were supposed to pick a potato for each person they didn’t like, draw a funny face on the potato to represent their enemies and pack them up in a plastic bag. The teacher then set each plastic bag on the floor by their desk. Some only had one or two potatoes. Some had more. The first week, the potatoes grew eyes and started to shrivel, but by the second week, those potatoes in those bags had started to break down. They turned gooey, slimy, then stinky, until the classroom fairly reeked of rotting potato. Their teacher explained: when you carry around hate and dislike, this is what happens – it tinges every part of your life with a stench. You are the one who suffers most.

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 – it affects how we evaluate the world around us, our relationships, and our own self-image. Our own hearts will either imprison us or free us, depending on whether we opt for love or for rot.

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. God cares deeply about the choices we make; about what I resist, what I support, and whether I love when it’s hard

to do. 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 I can't live only to myself. I can't live as if I existed in plastic bubble. Because that's no kind of life. As hard as it is, and part of the reason I come back to this again and again and again week after week after week is because in order to make a difference in the world, we must be different from the world.

To wrap up the service today, Bryan asked if he could play *One Love* by Bob Marley. One love; One heart; Let's get together and we'll feel all right. What fascinates me about the song is that it responds to an old beloved spiritual called *People Get Ready* by Curtis Mayfield. Some of you will remember that song because I've used it before during Advent. People get ready, there's a train a-comin'. John Denver does a beautiful rendition of it. The bridge of "People Get Ready" goes like this:

*There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner,
who would hurt all mankind to save his own.
Have pity on those whose choices grow thinner.
There's no hiding place from the Kingdom's throne."*

It's pretty judgmental, if you really stop to think about it. But several music critics seem to think that Bob Marley pushes that. The verses of *One Love* may be interpreted as questioning the original premise of *People Get Ready*. In *One Love*, Bob Marley sings these verses:

*Now, let them all pass all their dirty remarks, but there is one question I'd really like to ask:
Ain't there a place for the hopeless sinner who has hurt all mankind just to save his soul?
One Love, One heart, Let's get together and we'll be alright.*

And then

*Let's join together to fight this holy battle
so when the Man comes there will be no, no doom
Pray mercy on those whose chances grows thinner;
there ain't no hiding place when the King comes along.
One Love, One heart, Let's get together and we'll feel alright.
Let's work together and we'll be alright.*

Have pity on those whose choices grow thinner. Pray mercy on them. For they live only to themselves. And that's no life. Friends, the diversity of humankind is breathtaking in its beauty. But our diversity is dwarfed by our common humanity. What purpose is served in tearing down others? What purpose is served in dividing us? What purpose is served in fearing others? We find ourselves when we give ourselves. One Love. One Heart. One Church. One God. One mission. Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion. Let's work together and we'll be alright. Amen.