

We Belong to God

Romans 14:1-12 *We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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.*

The reading this morning from Paul's Letter to the Romans can shed light on two aspects of the spiritual life that are emphasized in Covenant Membership. First is the discipline of "endeavoring in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness." This is perhaps the most central and challenging of spiritual disciplines, to bring the love of God out of our heads and into our lives, to move from ideas about God's love to the practice of love toward others, ourselves, and the creation itself.

Paul has been talking about the centrality of love in the community of Christ. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Love fulfills everything God expects of us. But how do we love in this way? Paul points to a real situation in the Roman community. There are disputes over dietary practices. Some feel free to eat meat while others are vegetarians. Those who came out of so-called pagan religions brought some of those views and practices with them. They also believed that some days were "special" because of astrological signs and such. These folks had not yet grasped the gospel of God's love that liberates us from obsessions with performing the right rituals or obeying certain laws. For this reason, they were seen as "weak" in faith by those who had a more "mature" spiritual outlook. But you can be CORRECT in your ideas without being RIGHT in the way you treat other people! That's what Paul was trying to get at.

The labels such as "weak" and "strong" are ours, not God's. Like all labels, we use them to separate ourselves from other people, to distinguish ourselves, make ourselves feel somehow "different," that is, better. Paul is saying that this is a failure in the kind of love we are to have for one another in Christ. The issues in Rome may seem pretty minor to us. But there really are no "minor" issues when it comes to loving each other. Little or big things can arouse in us arrogance, hostility and even violence. We tend to reject others outright because they are different from us in beliefs or practices or culture. So we resort to labels: Weak/strong, wrong/right, conservative/liberal, mature/immature. We put others into categories so that we can feel more secure about ourselves. We want to distinguish ourselves from others

and see ourselves as superior in some way—racially, nationally, politically, spiritually.

However, Paul drops a bomb. "Welcome those who are weak in faith." Okay, so you think these persons have an immature faith, and maybe they do. But your job is to embrace them as brothers and sisters, not to judge them. If you are really "strong," if you really understand what Christ is about, then you will welcome the weak and not in order to change them, not to badger them about their spiritual lives. Karl Barth gives a strong translation of this sentence: "**Maintain fellowship** with him that is weak in faith. Do not provoke him **to doubt his own convictions!**" Now, that's truly radical stuff. We are to leave each other alone, quit trying to change each other. We are to "maintain fellowship" with those whose views and practices are different from our own, even when they seem to us immature or just plain irritating. The word "welcome" is from the Greek word (*lambano*) that means "take hold of" or "grasp to oneself." Hang onto each other! Be faithful to each other! Here is an echo of God's "steadfast love" (*hesed*). "O love that wilt not let me go!" We are to relate to each other in the same way that God relates to us, with the same kind of love God has for us—a love that holds onto each of us as precious and beloved. In a day when religious communities, like the society itself, continue to divide in every way possible—racially, socio-economically, politically, and so forth—Paul's words mess everything up. They call us to something deeper, something more in touch with the reality of who God is and what kind of community we are supposed to be in Christ.

We welcome each other because each of us is welcomed into this community by God in Christ. Each person coming into our community of faith is drawn here by God's invitation, God's leading. That is why we talk about "call," feeling ourselves "called" into this community where we can seek and take seriously what it means to follow Christ. We don't decide who is and who isn't ready for this kind of expression of Christian faith. It is up to each person in her or his relationship to God. As a community, we need to cultivate an environment that expresses God's inviting love, focus on trying our best to live our faith with integrity, and welcome each person who responds as one who has indeed been led here by God and wants to make a commitment to a deeper spiritual life.

Paul is saying that to truly love each other, we must hold on to one another with the same steadfast love God has for us. This "holding on" kind of love means, at the same time, letting go of each other in terms of judging and measuring one another's faith or faithfulness. God's love establishes radical freedom in our relationships with one

another. It is at precisely this point that Paul's words touch on the second spiritual discipline, or practice—accountability.

Accountability has to do with drawing support from the community as we live out our commitment to a deeper spiritual life. The life of faith is first of all a matter of God's grace and not our efforts or our merit. The spiritual life as we receive God's unconditional love for us embodied in Christ. Our response to that grace is following Christ in discipleship. We commit ourselves to making Christ's call and leading the forming center of our lives. We need some way to be accountable for that commitment so we will stay on track. If I make a promise to do something, I know that I need help fulfilling that commitment. I need someone to remind me. I need ways to keep that commitment in front of me so that I remember it and move toward fulfilling it. That's what accountability is—getting the help we need, incorporating in our lives some ways of staying focused on our commitments, so that we move along toward fulfilling them. When we give a report on our spiritual life to our mission group or meet with someone regularly to talk about how we are doing with prayer or discovering our gifts or discerning what it is we feel called to do with our lives, that is accountability.

Our accountability, however, is to God, not to each other. We love each other in the way Paul says because we understand that each person belongs to God, not to us. We refrain from judging each other's spiritual lives for the same reason—each person is ultimately accountable to God. “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.” That's how Paul sees it. Who do we think we are to judge and measure another person's faith and the way they are trying to work it out in their lives? That's not our place. We don't have the authority to pass judgment on anyone, much less another follower of Christ. Each of us is accountable not to each other but to God alone. And Paul says that this accountability to God is not a fearful thing, but is filled with God's grace. Yes, we stand before God, but it is God who helps us stand, who holds us up. God empowers us to fulfill the very life of faith we undertake. God is not against us; God is for us. As we make our commitments to the life of faith, to the spiritual life, God is not only the one toward whom we desire to grow but the one who empowers us to fulfill our commitment.

“We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves,” says Paul. Whether we live or die, we belong to God in Christ. Our living and our dying are completely embraced by God. We are never out of God's sight, God's care, God's purposes. Christ's death and resurrection bear this out, says Paul. Even his terrible and unjust death on the cross could not separate him from God. And his new life, his

living presence with us is a continuation of his union with God, which he shares with us. So, he is the lord of the dead and the living. He is the one in whom and through whom we always have communion with God, an unbreakable, unshakeable relationship of life and love.

When we speak of accountability, we must, then, understand that each of us is accountable not to each other but to God. However, we need to be part of a community that helps us with this accountability, that helps us stay focused and on track. We need others with whom to share honestly our struggles and failures, and to celebrate our growth and our deeper discoveries. Spiritual growth and the deepening of our relationship with God do not happen without the help and support of the community. Being people whose lives and gifts are channels of God's redemptive love in the world is a great challenge. We need to be in a community of others who have taken on the same commitments, who struggle with the same challenges, with whom we can share our discouragements and our doubts, and celebrate our breakthroughs and growth.

So, the importance of accountability in terms of the spiritual practices or disciplines we accept has to do with our own life in relationship to God. This kind of spiritual life takes seriously the fact that each of us has this one precious life to live and a deep desire is to live it as fully as we can. And yet, we need one another, a community in which to sustain a life that grows deeper and more focused on who God has made and called each of us to be. Let me put it this way: Our accountability with a capital “A” is to God alone; accountability with a small “a” is how we remind and encourage each other in the fulfilling of what we have undertaken.

To love with God's love means taking our hands off each other, relinquishing our impulses to measure and control others. It means holding onto each other with a love that recognizes in the other person one who belongs first of all to God and not to me. The freedom of this kind of love releases me and the other person to embrace our accountability to God, to seek and discover continually what it is God has made and called us to be and to do in our unique and precious lives. It is in this freedom of love that we offer to and receive from one another the support and sometimes the challenge that keeps us on this journey of faith. It is a journey that leads us to God and to our true selves. It is a journey that is always IN the God to whom we belong, whether we are living or dying.