

Not Judging

Romans 14:1-12 *Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?*

In a major city like Rome, much of the meat that was offered for sale to the public had been sacrificed to idols. So, some Christians in the early church had a problem: Do I take into my body something that was offered as a sacrifice to pagan gods? Some chose to eat no meat. Others decided that God was larger than this issue and went ahead and enjoyed their lamb chops. So, each made a practical ethical decision based on her or his best insight and understanding of the faith.

That would have been fine if everyone had left everyone else alone. But we have this habit of projecting what is good for us onto everyone else. Apparently the meat eaters scoffed at the vegetarians as being less mature in faith. Didn't Jesus say it is not what goes into our bodies that defiles us but what comes out of our hearts and minds? (Mark 7:14-23) In turn, the vegetarians were appalled at the lax morals of the meat eaters, that they would so unthinkingly eat the meat of idol worship. So you see how quickly matters of personal insight, experience, and obedience turn into conflicts? The issues in first century Rome may not be our issues, but the behavior is the same. We see it in others. We see it in ourselves, if we look honestly.

So Paul uses this very practical circumstance in the Roman Christian community to talk about something at the heart of Christian life and faith – not judging. To the “strong” Christians, Paul says, “Welcome those who are weak in faith [or conviction], but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.” Paul is pushing those who consider themselves broadminded, progressive, or liberated because of their deep understanding of the Gospel to welcome those who aren't where they are. Paul probably agreed that those who were offended by eating sacrificed meat had not yet come to the freedom of the Gospel. However, he does not support unwelcoming and argumentative attitudes and actions. We are to welcome others in Christ...period! Not in order to change them. Not in order to get them to agree with us. Not in order to get them to be more like us. Why? Because God has already welcomed them! It is not we who extend the welcome, the invitation, the call into the community of faith. It is God in Christ. Those whom God has welcomed, no one can exclude.

“Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?” Those who come into the community are not OUR servants. Nor does God call them to serve in the same way we do. They have their own relationship with God, and that is our primary relationship. We each belong to God, and not to each other. And yet, because we each belong because of God's welcoming love, we are bound to love one another in the way God loves us, to treat one another the way God treats us. The unity of the community of faith has nothing to do with agreement on ideas or even actions. As Paul wrote so beautifully in 1 Cor. 12, the unity of the body of Christ manifests itself in a diversity of gifts and callings and ministries. The fulfillment of our lives comes not by conforming to others' desires or expectations, but being the persons God made us to be and doing the things God calls us to do with the unique gifts God has given each of us.

As a community of Jesus, our relationships with one another must always come back to this spiritual insight and truth. There are times when we disagree on matters of what it means to think or act like a follower of Jesus. Paul is not saying that there are not important issues that we will disagree on or that need to be discussed and explored together. What he is talking about are times when we fall into arguing with others, pushing our point of view, our convictions on them. There are times when we look at each other in measuring and analyzing ways. We fall into thinking that we have each other figured out and, of course, the other person is always the one who needs, in our view, to grow or change or adopt a better perspective, which, of course, is our own! To use another of Paul's images, this is the “old person” still holding sway in us, the little dictator, the self that sees itself as the center of the universe. It is this “old person,” writes Paul elsewhere, that has to die in order for the “new self” to become manifest. This is our true Self which we know through our discipleship to Christ. This is what Paul means by “dying and rising with Christ.”

“Let all be fully convinced in their own minds,” Paul continues. The only thing that matters in the long run is whether each of us is being as faithful to God as we can be. It is not how others are living their lives, but how we are living ours that ultimately matters. We can do very little, if anything, to change another person. And when it comes to the life of faith, we each must give our attention to how we are living OUR lives. Are we being as faithful as we can be to our relationship with God and what that relationship means for the way we think and act and live? Whatever we are doing, are we doing it in a spirit of gratitude to God? Are our own thoughts and actions carried out as ways of loving God, of worshiping God with our whole lives?

My professor of theology in seminary, Dr. William Barr, said to us: “Theology is loving God with our minds.” That changed everything for me! Learning is not for the purpose of knowing more than someone else or winning arguments or showing people how smart we are. It is a way of loving God! And so with everything else we do each day. Let those who eat do so as an act of worship and love of God. Let those who abstain do the same, says Paul.

Whether others are “fully convinced” in their own minds or not, whether others have the same insight, wisdom, or experience that we have, our work is to live our own lives with integrity of faith. Sooner or later we must come to understand that OUR own life is a journey that only WE can make, and that is our utmost concern. When we allow ourselves to get caught up in what other people are thinking or believing or doing, and we find ourselves becoming filled with hostility or aggression toward them, then it is time to go back to ourselves. I think that is a good image for the life of prayer, the inward journey – it is going back to ourselves, our own lives in God.

Finally, Paul brings it home. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.” We live and die to God. And in our living and in our dying, we belong to God. We do not live to one another or die to one another. That is, we do not belong to each other, but to God, ultimately and most deeply. So, says Paul, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” He puts it all in that sentence, doesn’t he? He calls us to question our own tendency to judge others, reminding us that they are our sisters and brothers in God’s love. Like us, every other human being is created and loved by God, and belongs first of all to God and not us.

Paul ends with these words: “So then, each of us will be accountable to God.” Those words sound ominous, don’t they? But they really aren’t. They remind us of our true belonging, our true home, which is in God. These are actually very liberating words. They free us from the suffering we cause ourselves when we engage in judging others and shutting them out of our hearts. They free us also from the suffering we take on when we let others’ judgments rule our own lives. At the core of our being is this freedom of belonging to God.

Political campaigns remind us how far we are as a human family from the life Paul is talking about, the life that is infused with and expresses the love of God. Judgments fly. Lines are drawn. Instead of real and serious probing of issues and needs and helpful directions, we get torrents of personal attacks. The candidates count on us to fall for this, to divide up and continue to live life in an adversarial way – us and them. This is the source of hostility, hate, and violence, whether emotional, spiritual, or physical. Jesus called together a little group of people to learn a different way, to become a manifestation of what life together really looks like when it is in touch with its Source, with God. Paul was working with the same vision. For him, the Christian community had a calling to demonstrate within its own life the ways of thinking, acting, and living that manifest life the way God made it to be lived.

We must not diminish the importance of the issue Paul was addressing in the Roman community. It may seem insignificant to us from our vantage point today. But for those struggling to live faithfully then, this was as deep and heartfelt an issue as anything we deal with today. The point Paul was making had to do with HOW we work with these things. We all have deep convictions about what we believe is at the core of Christian life and faith. That is the way it should be. Yet Paul was saying that how we go about it makes the difference. Falling into arguing, fighting, and dealing forcibly with one another is not the way of Jesus. In the end, each of us must come back to our own lives and how we are living them within our relationship with God.

Yesterday we held our annual recommitment silent retreat. Being together in silence as we reflect on our own spiritual commitments is an important reminder of the truth Paul is talking about. Our community is here for persons who desire to take responsibility for their own lives of faith, to live their lives as a journey in God and in service to the world. We are not here to tell one another what to do, what to think, what to believe, but to be a community of God’s love in which each person can and is encouraged to take that ultimate responsibility for her or his own life. What God has called me to be and do with the gifts God has given me is what ultimately matters. How we take that journey within a community of God’s love is, I think, both the greatest challenge and the greatest blessing of our lives.