

September 14, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Not Judging and Forgiveness

Romans 14:1-12      *Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? ... For we all stand before the judgment seat of God.*

Matthew 18:21-35      "... how often should I forgive?"

Last week, we heard these words from Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Owe no one anything but to love one another ... love is the fulfilling of the law." That is our true nature, the way the sacred source and power of life we call God is expressed in human beings. Today's readings from Romans and the Gospel of Matthew are a further reflection on what it means to love. Here are two ways love is lived out—in non-judging and forgiveness. This is the way we live when we are aware that each of us belongs first of all to God. Let's start with the reading from Romans.

In the Rome of Paul's day, meat that had been sacrificed to various gods was offered for sale in the marketplace. Some in the early Christian community had a problem: Do I take into my body something that was sacrificed to pagan gods? So they chose to eat no meat. Others believed that faith was larger than such issues, so they went ahead and enjoyed their lamb chops. Each made a decision based on her or his best understanding of the faith.

That would have been fine if they had left each other alone. However, we have this habit of projecting what is good for us onto others. The meat eaters thought that the vegetarians had an immature, or weak, 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) The vegetarians were horrified by the lax morals of the meat eaters. So you see how matters of personal insight, experience, and beliefs are turned into conflicts? The issues in first century Rome may not be our issues, but the behavior is the same. All of us have a tendency to measure and judge others' faith or spirituality by our own.

Paul uses this issue to talk about something at the heart of Christian life and faith--not judging. To the "strong" Christians, Paul says, "Welcome (*proslambanomai*=accept, receive) those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." Paul pushes those who consider themselves progressive or mature in their faith to welcome those who aren't where they are. He probably agreed that those who were offended by eating meat had not yet come to the

fullness of faith that frees us from anxious legalism. However, he condemns unwelcoming and argumentative attitudes as contrary to the word of God's love in Jesus. We welcome others because God's love has already welcomed them. We are not here to be subject to one another's judgments, but to receive, grow in, and live out of God's love, and to be servants of that love in the world.

Paul asks, "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" Since we each belong because of God's welcoming love, we are bound to love one another in the way God loves us. The unity of the community of faith is not about agreeing on ideas, viewpoints, or even actions. As Paul wrote so beautifully in 1 Cor. 12, the unity of the body of Christ manifests in a diversity of gifts and callings and ministries. I like the way the *Tao te Ching* puts it: "If you look to others for fulfillment, you will never be fulfilled.(44)" The fulfillment of our lives does not come from conforming to others' expectations, or by others conforming to ours. That is a vicious, empty cycle that will keep us perpetually unhappy and unfulfilled. We find fulfillment by being the persons God made each of us to be and doing the things God calls us to do with the gifts God has given us.

As a community, we need always to return to this insight and truth. There are times when we disagree on matters of what it means to think or act like a follower of Jesus, what it means to live a life of faith. Paul is not saying that there are not important issues that we need to address. 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 think 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! To use another of Paul's images, this is the "old person" in us, the little dictator, the small self that fancies itself the center of the universe. It is this "old person," writes Paul elsewhere, that has to die in order for the "new self", our true self, to become manifest. Paul calls this process "dying and rising with Christ."

"Let all be fully convinced in their own minds," Paul continues. What matters most is whether each of us is being as faithful to God as we can be. 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 out of our faith, are we doing it in a spirit of gratitude to God? Are we doing it as an expression of our love of 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 having all the answers 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. The other day Vince

Sawyer found me upstairs cleaning the sun porch. He told me he had not seen me doing the cleaning before. I told him it was cleaning meditation, that the Chrysalis Mission Group was taking September not only to reflect on our commitments but to also to do needed cleaning of the retreat center spaces. Whatever we do, we can do it with gratitude and love. Let those who think one day is holier than another and those who count all days the same do so with gratitude and as a way of honoring God. It is the same with those who eat meat and those who abstain, says Paul.

Whether others are “fully convinced” in their own minds or not, or share our own views, our work is to live our own lives with integrity of faith. When we get caught up in what other people are thinking or believing or doing, and we find ourselves becoming filled with judgmentalism or hostility 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, to our own lives in God.

Finally, Paul brings it home. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.” In our living and in our dying, we belong to God. We do not live to one another or die to one another. We belong most intimately and ultimately to God. So, says Paul, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” He calls us to look at our own judging of others. If we use that question--Why do I pass judgment on this person or that person?--as a point of reflection on our own inner life, we will learn and grow a great deal. Working with that question for ourselves will bring us greater self-understanding and a greater capacity for loving.

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 deepest belonging, our true home, which is in God. These are liberating words. They free us from the suffering we cause ourselves when we judge others and shut them out of our hearts. They free us also from the suffering we take on when we let others’ judgments rule our own lives. Yet, the words also remind us of our truest identity and calling, as Paul put it—owe no one anything but to love one another.

A brief word about forgiveness and the reading from Matthew’s gospel. There is so much more to be said and discussed about both non-judging and forgiveness. I simply hope that what I say is suggestive, will encourage you to reflect on these things in your own lives and experience.

Peter asks an important question. “Jesus, if someone else in the community sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?” In other words, if someone offends or hurts me in some way, how many times do I have to put up with it before I lower the boom! Peter is looking for a

limit, a boundary. Jesus' answer is profound. How many times? Seventy-seven times. Or it could be translated, seventy times seven. The number seven is a symbol of completeness or, in this case, on-goingness. It is something you continue to do. You never stop. I think what Jesus is really saying is that it is not at all a matter of numbers, of keeping count. It is about a condition of our own minds and hearts and spirits. Forgiveness is the way we come to live our lives.

The parable Jesus tells is straightforward. The servant who is forgiven a huge debt because he begged for mercy, refuses to show that same mercy to one who owed him a pittance. I think at least Jesus is saying that all of us have received the extravagant, unconditional, and steadfast love of God. We are to show that same love toward each other. The word forgive in the text (*aphiemi*) has several shades of meaning: forgive, cancel, let be, tolerate, let go of. So basically, to live as forgiving persons is to be working with our capacity to let go of situations, hurts, people, without hanging onto things. Forgiveness, like non-judging, like love itself, means discerning what to do in each situation, with each person.

Both of our readings, along with Paul's teaching that love fulfills everything, are rooted in the basic understanding that each of us belongs first to God, that we each live to God and die to God. This is a source of great comfort to us. Whether we live or die, we belong to God and God's eternal love. It is also a call to live the way we are meant and made to live—the life of love.

In three weeks, we will hold 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, and to do so in community. 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 take that ultimate responsibility for her or his own life. What God has called each of us to be and do with the gifts God has given us is what ultimately matters. Undertaking that journey within a community of God's love is, I think, both the greatest challenge and the greatest blessing of our lives. It means that we will continue to learn what it means to love through forgiveness and non-judgment, and in many other ways. It means coming home to our true selves.