

Do Not Judge

Romans 14:1-12

¹ Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those 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. ⁴ 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.

⁵ Some 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. ⁶ Those 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.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why 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. ¹¹ For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."

¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Maybe you have heard the story of the stranger who came into a small town one day and stood in the center of the town square. He had on a very strange coat. It was black and sewn onto it were patches of cloth of all sizes, shapes, and colors. As word spread of this strange visitor, the townspeople gathered around in curious silence. Finally, a brave soul dared to ask about the significance of the unique coat.

The stranger immediately began to point to different patches and explained that they represented the sins of different people of the town. Embarrassed, some people left the square. Indignant, others shook their head in denial of the accusations. After explaining every patch and denouncing every sin, the man turned around and headed out of town. On his back was a dark patch of cloth that

covered almost his entire back. The townspeople wondered out loud what, and whose, sin that patch represented. Suddenly a voice rang out loud and clear; "That represents his own sin, for he is willing to point out the shortcomings of others and yet fails to see his own."

The Gospel of Matthew puts it this way: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3 NIV). Scripture warns us about being quick to judge others in light of our own opinions and ways. As believers we are called to live in community. Many seem to form community only with those who are in complete agreement with their opinions or way of seeing things. Gospel living is a constant challenge of the status quo of daily living. We are called to live in community in a way that pushes us out of our comfort zones, inviting us to listen and learn from others who see things from different perspectives. **Gilberto Collazo**

We must smile, because here is Paul in our scripture, of all people, apparently urging us to avoid passing judgment, while, at the same time, he seems unable to resist characterizing those with whom he disagrees as weak in faith!

Paul is not addressing trivial matters but is speaking about doctrinal issues of the sort that led to serious disputes with James and Peter, issues so serious that many in Rome saw them as a basis for denial of fellowship.

We can think of controversies about which we too are so passionate that we cannot honestly avoid portraying our opponents as confused in faith, issues considered so significant that they sometimes serve as a basis for rejecting fellowship: homosexuality, abortion, evolution, creation-ism, ordination of women, universalism, authority of Scripture, or the significance of the Lord's Supper in the Christian life. Whatever your side, if we see any controversy dividing our church as a basis for exclusion of fellowship, Paul is speaking to us.

Paul is not suggesting that we should stop advocating for our respective views. Paul clearly values and regularly engages in theological argument. Paul's concern and passion here is the *spirit* of Christians who are arguing. Paul is advocating passionate grace, beyond judgment, beyond justice—grace, real and enduring...a gracious spirit for and toward those with whom we bitterly disagree.

Paul asks us to be careful and not to regard people as personifications of some particular sin or evil. Once we stop seeing another person as a child of God and view him or her instead as the personification of a sin, it becomes easy to enjoy the energy of disdain and self-righteous opposition. It becomes easy to lose ourselves to opposition to oppression, to define ourselves in terms of our opposition to sin. The child of God before us is effaced as the enemy becomes the personification of sin, and the child of God within ourselves is simultaneously and proportionally effaced as the hero and fighter against oppression, against sin.

Commentator William Greenway said he recently received a solicitation with this hook: "Ready to annoy the radical right?" He typically supports this organization, but the spirit that can delight in "annoying" anyone has forgotten the love that loves enemies. It participates in the harmful, in-group/out-group "spirituality" that develops identity in opposition to enemies and in commitment to some cause. It has forgotten that our identity is not derived from political, economic, or moral standing or from identification with some people in opposition to others.

Paul breaks the devastating identification/ opposition, us/them dynamic by invoking a pivotal transcending truth: "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (v. 8). Beyond actions and opinions, we are instructed to continually see in every other a child of God, a soul never beyond the reach of transforming grace.

Paul never forgets that. Save for the extension of such radical grace toward a powerful enemy of God, he would still and ever be Saul, persecutor of the innocent, watching the coats while stones break Stephen. Certainly, Saul was wrong. Certainly, Saul was an enemy of God, an unrighteous oppressor. Certainly, we would argue vigorously with and oppose Saul. However, even in this extreme case, God loved Saul, loved Saul with the love that loves enemies. **William Greenway**

In trying to hold on to our usual ways, we limit the power of transformation that the gospel is constantly calling us to experience. As in any system, we are only as strong as the weaker members of our community. Paul insists we receive into the community those who may be weak in the faith, and those who see things in different manners. The invitation is not to engage individuals in debate, or to try to change them into what we are or think they should be, but rather to embrace all people as equals in Christ.

There are people in churches who like to throw our weight around. We feel that because we are founding members of the church, or have contributed substantially to the church, we are "strong." Others of us may think that because we occupy positions in the church or have some theological training, we have an advantage over others in the congregation. The problem is that we want to define strength and weakness from concepts that are counter to the manner in which they are defined in the realm of God.

Our strength comes not from our traditions or our church membership. Strength is not defined by how much Bible we know, or even how much we contribute financially to the congregation. Our strength lies in understanding that the integrity with which we live our lives is tied directly to how our beliefs guide our actions. Unfortunately, there is a great discrepancy in this area when the strong are willing to point out the shortcomings of others and fail to see that this action in itself

points to our own spiritual weakness. There are many of us who self-identify as "strong Christians," when the truth of the matter is that our judgmental spirit renders us weak in the eyes of God and the community.

When we come together, we come celebrating our differences. We come knowing that some are struggling, others are rejoicing in newfound victories, and some are just coasting along—but that is all right. Sadly, many of us have lost our joy in being part of a faith community. The joyful celebrations of community life have given way to tradition-burdened rituals that have lost the capacity to bring joy to the heart.

The spiritual walk of many persons is a long list of dos and don'ts. This was not Christ's intention when he invited people to be his followers. Many have referred to Paul's letter to the Romans as the Freedom Letter. In other words, permission is granted here to live a relationship with Christ in a manner that makes sense and can be enjoyed. Nevertheless, many find our strength in becoming church police, enforcing church policies that serve no real purpose other than to rob the community of its vitality and newness.

God invites us into an experience that has significance and purpose for our lives. That does not mean the same thing for every member of our faith community. Sometimes discovering or rediscovering that joy requires that we come out of our comfort zones, into a willingness to try new things. With this comes the responsibility of tolerance. Our spiritual practices, as well as our daily living, must grow from our own convictions, not the convictions of others. Otherwise our spiritual practices become empty rituals, devoid of significance and the power to transform. **Gilberto Collazo**

We will still argue. With regard to some moral issues, such as murder, incest, pedophilia; we will even act forcibly. We will disagree about our politics. Paul is not negating political, doctrinal, or moral realities, but he disarms all such

judgments by reminding us that they are not ultimate, that first and last we stand not because we are in the right, but because by grace we are the Lord's.

First and last, we argue for the right and struggle for the good, not for the sake of ourselves or our own opinions or identity—or even for the sake of the church, justice, or the good—but because we are moved by love and concern for every particular other, which is to say, because in life and in death we belong to God.

William Greenway

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).