

Sermon - 15th Pentecost
Romans 14:1-12
September 17, 2017
“Conversation Guidelines”

An admiral is chatting on the deck of a Navy ship with some enlisted men. *"What would you do if another sailor fell overboard?"* A sailor promptly replied: *"I would raise the alarm and toss him a life preserver, sir."* The admiral then asked: *"What would you do if it were an officer?"* The enlisted man thought a bit before answering - *"Which one, sir?"* Humorous I suppose unless you're an officer - or simply an honest human being. How often do we allow personal feelings about a group of people or a personal history with a certain person to influence who we would show kindness towards or even associate with. By way of an illustration about dietary practices, Paul today offers counsel for we whom God threw the greatest life preserver of all.....Jesus Christ.

The issue in Rome was not just low carb or vegan diets. Food and faith were knotted for Christians of Jewish origin, but of these traditions non-Jewish Christians were unaware or unconcerned. Paul reminds them to be careful about whom they might un-wittingly *"throw overboard"* because of differences in how they practice their now common faith. Romans 12 insisted we see ourselves as one body with many members – each belonging to one another. This means learning to submit to one another with regard to what one person's faith can and cannot bear – with the presumably stronger consciences submitting to the weaker ones. The wider culture in which we live notwithstanding, the culture of the church would be one where the right to exercise some freedom would be foregone if it harmed the faith of another. Paul claimed he would never eat meat again if it harmed a fellow believer - aiming this bold statement at non-Jewish Christians who were free to eat pork any day of the week. Yet those same non-Jewish Christians who were never taught to observe or appreciate old Jewish faith traditions like Passover, space was afforded.

We may think these disputes are extraneous to modern faith practices, and in a sense they are. But turn the tables and ask yourself what would our ancient brethren think of our popular disputes? What constitutes proper Christian worship in our congregation – or put another way *"what songs are we gonna sing?"* Should a proper sermon come from the pulpit or should a preacher "connect" with the congregation by walking around the altar area? Should we even have altars anymore? When should a person be baptized? Who can be married? What's the best way to reach emerging generations for Christ or get folks who have or may have young children to come around regularly? As a result of that question we will soon be in conversation about adding to our ministry staff – but differences of opinion about how to define and do what we call *"youth and family ministry"* should be expected and accepted.

In the early chapters of Romans Paul asked his own people the Jews, quite forcefully *"why Jewish – what difference was it supposed to have made that God called your ancestors?"* Today, Paul might ask us *"Why Christian – what difference does it make that God has called you?"* It makes all the difference in the world to your soul - but what difference is it making in your life and how can people tell that it is? In Romans 14 Paul urges non-Jewish Christians to remember their freedom to eat anything put on their plate or schedule a day at the beach on Jewish holidays should not be used to demean Jewish believers who still clung, for the sake of faith, to the prohibition against some foods and the sacredness of their festivals. The measure of a Christian was who they cared about.

Paul also wrote out of concern that the church not dislodge the cross and Scripture as the foundation of the faith. It matters how we read our Bible, how for example we read our creation story in Genesis. It pertains to whether or not we recognize as a marriage people of the same gender or whether or not we believe an abortion is a responsible moral decision. It matters how we read Genesis so that we realize God gave nothing of the creation to us save the responsibility to tend and care for it, which should cause us to ponder toward how modern economies tend to “*tend and care*” for their own flourishing and not the fragile seas and skies. It matters that we hear Cain’s question to God in Genesis 4 - “*am I my brother’s keeper*” (God’s answer was clearly “yes”) and realize that question is relevant to issues like health care (and God’s answer is the same). The measure of a Christian is who we care about.

But these are conversations between God and the whole human race. It does not matter how we decide issues of worship, or the call to the ministry, or when someone should be baptized, or whether we offer communion weekly or yearly as these are conversations between ourselves, as ones who submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. It does not even matter if we frequent the shops or share a meal with someone who does not share our beliefs. What does matter is whether we exercise those freedoms carefully and graciously, and do so with a mind toward other members of the body of Christ – their faith and their conscience. We have to ask ourselves - do we care enough about someone’s fragile faith to refrain from speaking our acting out of strong faith? You are free from condemnation for your own sins on account of the grace of God. You are not free of responsibility to someone in the body who is still working out what that grace and tremendous sacrifice of God means for them in everyday life.

N.T. Wright, the English Theologian who I have cited often in this preaching series, offers this analogy on Romans 14. A young man gets up one morning and is eager to make some money. But there is snow to be cleared from the walkway from the previous night's downfall. “*Start there*” says his father, *and when you're finished and we get to the garage, we'll have some additional chores to do*”. Eager, the young man clears the walkway in no time. On his way back in to collect his pay, near the doorstep where his father meets him, comes a voice from next door; “*after you're done, would you please come and clear all the extra snow you've just put on my sidewalk?*” The father looked at his son and said “*this looks like a two person job now.*”

Everything about being a Christian is a “two person” job. Nothing can be done for God that hasn't already been done by for you by Jesus Christ; and no work of ours can be called a good one without it being done for Jesus’ sake. Paul’s concern in concluding his letter to the Romans is that we don’t forget that, or that in clearing our own spiritual path, we end up making it harder for our neighbor to walk theirs. Jesus said the way is narrow that leads to eternal life – the way of the cross. Paul’s concern is that we who walk it don’t make it any narrower for someone else than it needs to be. Your salvation comes from the one who threw himself onto the cross in the first place. The measure of a Christian is who we care about – our mindset always that how we care give evidence that we’re clinging to Jesus for our very lives too. AMEN