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Pentecost XVI & Proper 19

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Text: Romans 14:1 – 12

Title: Living In Light of Christ's Eternal Rule (Concluding the series "God's Greater Story" in Romans by Dr. David Schmidt from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. This morning, St. Paul's letter to the Romans shifts from talking about food to talking about the return of Christ. He starts by talking about eating daily food. Some Christians in Rome were only eating vegetables and others were eating anything. There was disagreement about whether or not Roman Christians should keep Jewish food laws. Could they eat meat that wasn't kosher? If in doubt, should they not eat meat at all? So, at first Paul is writing about something small and worldly. He's dealing with the details of daily meals. But then Paul shifts his focus to what is large and eternal. He asks us to remember that we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We'll give an account to Him of our lives. Here, Paul's vision expands. He sees the return of Christ and the Last Judgment that will embrace all of life, both now and forever.

In just a few short verses, Paul moves from the food on your plate to the judgment seat of Christ. From the small and the worldly to the large and the eternal. That brings up a question. What does daily eating have to do with the judgment of Christ? For Paul, Christ's return isn't something distant from us, but it's woven into the details of our daily lives. You are part of God's kingdom and Christ is returning in glory to judge the living and the dead. Whatever your plans for the day, remember that your daily life is woven into His Kingdom and everything you do is ruled by God, eating or sleeping, working or playing.

As Paul writes, "For none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we died to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." In baptism, God has claimed you as His own. He has joined you to

Christ. And Christ has risen and ascended and promises to come again. Until that day when He returns, you are His. Your daily life has been woven into His Kingdom and His Loving Rule is expressed in the details of your daily life. St. Paul wants Christians to know this.

Not surprisingly, this is a truth that we forget too often. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus gives us a picture of this problem in the "Parable of the Unforgiving Servant." Jesus contrasts two kingdoms: the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. You know the parable, a servant has a massive, unpayable debt, and he pleads with his master for mercy. Against all reason, the master forgives the debt, and the servant is free to go. Not long after, the servant sees someone who owes him a much simpler debt that would be easy to repay, but when he finds out that the debtor is not able to pay him back immediately, the servant shows no mercy and has him thrown in prison. When the master hears about what happened he punishes the servant that he originally forgave. The servant has walked into prison himself, choosing to live in a kingdom where everyone pays his or her debt. In the Kingdom of God, all debts are forgiven. In the kingdom of this world, all debts must be paid by the one who owes them.

With this parable, Jesus is inviting His disciples to live in God's kingdom, a kingdom where their sins are paid for not by their own hard work and effort but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God has opened the door for all of us to live in this kingdom where all sin is forgiven in Jesus. Yet, like the foolish servant, we sometimes choose to live in a kingdom where people have to pay their own debts.

That's the problem Paul is addressing. God's people in Rome have all been forgiven in Christ. God has brought them to New Life, and they live in Christ's eternal Kingdom. But, for them, Christ's kingdom doesn't change how they live with one another. Right now, they are fighting over food. Those who are strong in faith are despising those who are weak and those

who are weak are passing judgment on those who are strong. God's church is being divided. God has saved them all in His act of dying love and yet that love is dying. They no longer see it. They don't live it, but they despise and judge one another over something as simple as food.

Unfortunately, such fighting didn't end with the first century. It continues even today. Sometimes it happens over the smallest and most inconsequential matters, like how someone else chooses to organize an event differently or how no one else ever seems to help around here or that others don't see something to be as important as you do. Yes, the things over which we fight can be small, almost inconsequential, like eating vegetables or meat, but the damage that is done, the division of Christ's body, the way in which God's people turn away from His rule of love, is huge and can lead to people turning away from God and being lost.

This is what Paul was concerned about in Rome. And this is a concern that still confronts the church today. How do we live with one another? Do we receive and treat one another as people for whom Christ died? Do we live in the love of God that has brought us into His Kingdom and will lead us all to Everlasting Life with Him? Today, we can be thankful, for God Himself comes among us and forgives us our sins in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in verse 9, "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

When Christ Jesus entered this world, He came in humility. He gathered about Himself those who had accumulated great debts. Tax collectors who were stealing from God's people, women who had sold their bodies. Those who had wandered far from God's ways and were living in a distant country, in debt, and unable to set themselves free. These are the ones that Jesus gathered around Him, and these are the ones for whom Jesus died. Although He had no debt of His own, Jesus used His priceless life as payment for sin. Not His sin, but ours. Our lack of love for one another. Our willingness to judge and despise those for whom Christ died rather

than forgive and love them. These sins, all sins were laid upon Jesus and He died in payment of their costly debt. Today, Paul proclaims this wonderful truth among us. Jesus Christ died and lives again for you. That you might be His own and live under Him in His Kingdom. That He might be Lord of the living and the dead. We who have been baptized into Jesus have been baptized into His death and now our lives are His and His Kingdom is ours. His Kingdom is eternal, established in the heavens, and no one on this earth can ever take it away.

This is the Kingdom that Jesus describes in this morning's parable. This is the kingdom that Joseph, by faith, lives in. When Joseph's brothers came before him, they knew that they had sinned against him. They had sold him into slavery. They lied to their father, acting as if Joseph were dead. And now, after their father is dead, they lie to Joseph, telling him something their father never said, hoping to save their lives by a lie. They try to live by a lie they put on the lips of their father, but Joseph invites them to live by the truth that comes from God. Joseph lives by love not hatred. Joseph invites his brothers to live with him in the Kingdom of God. Here, God is alive and sins are forgiven and God's people live with one another in love. "Do not fear," he says, "I will provide for you and your little ones."

Jesus foretells this kingdom, His Kingdom, in a parable to His disciples. Joseph foreshadows this kingdom in love to his brothers. Paul now proclaims this kingdom in Christ for all people. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has brought us into His Kingdom. He forgives our sins and He invites us now to live with one another in love.

Christ Jesus rules over all, and there will be a day when everyone sees this. He will return to judge the living and the dead. On that day, He will fulfill His promise and raise us to live with Him in a New Creation. Until that time, however, we live by faith in this One who loves us. Although Jesus doesn't appear in the heavens right now to reveal His rule, He does appear in

small ways on this earth through the lives of His people. God's people reveal Christ's rule by living in this world in self-sacrificial love. Through the cross, Jesus has brought us all into His Kingdom, and until He returns we live by His love.

Whether the Christians in Rome are leaving their house churches, or we are leaving the church this morning, we do so only and always by God's grace. Our lives are now part of God's Loving kingdom. Daily events are moments for us to reveal the Forgiving Love of Jesus. Not only in how we treat one another but in how we treat others out in the world.

Over these past few weeks, St. Paul has told us God's greater story in Romans. God the Father sent His Son Jesus to live, die, and rise again to forgive all sins. Ascended into heaven, Jesus now rules at the right hand of His Father. He sends His Holy Spirit into our midst. God, the Holy Spirit, through baptism, brings us to Jesus. Jesus then brings us forgiven to His Father, and the Father makes us part of the people of God. We no longer live by or for ourselves but with God's holy people we live the purposes of God in service to one another.

God has a greater plan for you. That you live in the Light of Christ's eternal rule. He gathers you to hear His Word and to live by His proclamation. He offers you Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, and He sends you out to share His love in your daily life with others. God has woven you into His Kingdom, and your daily life is part of His Loving Rule. Whether you live or whether you die, you belong to the Lord. And one day, Jesus will come and bring His New Creation, for you and for all who trust in Him. Until that day, in life and in death, we say "To this God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory forever and ever. Amen." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.