



Many of us on the Protestant end of things have come to appreciate this passage we heard from Romans this morning, as it serves as a perfect opportunity to poke fun at our Roman Catholic siblings in Christ, whom we remember making some rather peculiar choices when it came to what they consumed during Lent, whether it be avoiding meat on Fridays or whatever else during the week. Many, *many* of us Lutherans have proudly used these words from Paul to give ourselves a little bit of an ego boost, to gain a sense of superiority over and against *those*

Catholics. And yet, there's a part of me that thinks that isn't exactly what Paul was going for: to try to create even more divisions in a church that was primed to be overwhelmed with them already when humanity gets involved.

Supposedly, Paul is not focusing on whether someone has a lesser faith percentage than others, but it is more so about conviction. So, it reminds me of one of my friends who went through an agnostic stage in his life: he wasn't so sure about this whole God thing for a while. He grew up going to worship regularly on our Protestant end of things. His mom even worked at the church. But...it just wasn't doing it for him. And I don't know if something in particular was said by the pastor or someone else in the congregation, but he gradually just got turned off by it altogether. And some of us, supposedly, "strong in the faith" Christians would say that he was weak, that he even lost the faith altogether. But I don't think it ever was that; it's just...the conviction wasn't quite there as much.

However, what turned it around, oddly enough, for him, started with his sister, who went through her own struggles as well, and eventually came out as a lesbian. Now, I know not all of us on the Protestant end of things or the Catholics or any other group of Christians, for that matter, are on the same page when it comes to people in same-gendered relationships, and, to be honest, I think that's what drove him further into questioning God (and does so for many people in my age group), because he didn't know of a church that would not just go along with his sister sitting in a pew, or talking with people after worship, but could actually love her, that could treat her as if she was just as loved by God as anyone else.

The church, after all, was supposed to be the living embodiment of God's grace on earth, the place and the people who did not care whatsoever who was weak or strong on anything in this life. And yet, he didn't see it. It's almost as if he couldn't see God doing it either, then. Or, what was worse, the wider church talked as if they would cherish his sister, but didn't really. It's as if the *church* didn't quite have the conviction in God's most radical love-engulfing inclusion. Many of us Protestants, Catholics, all children of God, for that matter, are not quite so comfortable with that Gospel applying across the universal board. Instead, we prefer to go along with the strong versus the weak comparisons amongst ourselves and God, of course, rewarding the first and not the last for the eternal stage.

So, come to think of it, I'm not so sure my friend ever lost the conviction in God, so much. It was the church who did. It was the church who appeared to be weak in its Gospel stronghold in comparison to this mighty God not of intimidating authoritative power, but of this mighty boundary-shattering love that was more than wide enough to surround absolutely every child of God of all times and places, no matter what. Yes, we like to think we're pretty well strong in our faith. After all, we believe there's a God, we believe in Jesus Christ who died and rose again, we

believe in the Holy Spirit that continues to work in our life. However, from our Lutheran perspective, faith isn't so much about that: faith is a gift from God, putting us into the deepest relationship possible with God that can never be taken away. Our weakness isn't so much about how much we believe that for ourselves; it's whether or not we have the conviction that God can render that most precious bond with someone else who's far, far different from us.

Thankfully my friend did find a church that not only talked about accepting that Gospel reality, but brought it to life in such a way that made him convinced God could love his sister, too. We can talk about all the historical context of the Bible and all the Martin Luther *Small Catechism* theology, all of which would make our ancestors incredibly proud, but when the real-life applications of God's grace and love hits your very own home, your very own family who you would do absolutely anything for, who you need for God to cherish even more than you do, that's a whole 'nother level of Emmanuel unleashed by the most radically inclusive God.

In the end, we will always have our fair share of weaknesses when it comes to going along with God loving the whole world to the point of death and beyond, but thankfully it isn't about how strong we are in comparison to others anyway; it's about how strong God is in reasserting unstoppable mercy and relentless love well, well beyond our permission. And so for that strength in grace that will never stop lifting up all of God's precious children, no matter what, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!